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THE ALPINE FAY

A ROMANCE

FROM THE GERMAN

OF

E. WERNER

[Bürstebinder, Elisabeth]

BY

MRS. A. L. WISTER



PHILADELPHIA

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY

1908.

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THE ALPINE FAY.

CHAPTER I.

A MOUNTAIN-HOME.

HIGH above the snow-crowned summits of the mountains gleamed a rainbow. The storm had passed; there was still a low mutter of thunder in the ravines, and masses of clouds lay encamped about the mountain-sides, but the skies were once more clear, the loftiest peaks were unveiling, and dark forests and green slopes were beginning slowly to emerge from the sea of cloud and mist.

The extensive Alpine valley through which rushed a considerable stream lay far in the depths of the mountain-range, so secluded and lonely that it might have been entirely shut off from the world and its turmoil; and yet the world had found the way to it. The quiet mountain-road, usually deserted save for an occasional wagon or a strolling pedestrian, was all astir with bustle and life. Everywhere were to be seen groups of engineers and labourers; everywhere measuring, surveying, and planning were going on; the railway, in a couple of years, was to stretch its iron arms forth into this mountain seclusion, and preparations were already making for its course.

Some way up the mountain-road, on the brink of a hollow whose rocky sides fell away in a steep descent, lay a dwelling-house, which at first sight did not appear to differ much from others scattered here and there among the mountains; a near view, however, soon made plain that it was no peasant's abode situated thus on the spacious green slope. The house had firmly-cemented walls of blocks of stone, and low but broad doors and windows; two semicircular projections, the pointed roofs of which gave them the air of small towers, lent it a stately appearance, and above the entrance there was artistically carved in the stone a scutcheon.

It was one of those old baronial mansions, yet to be found here and there among the mountains, simple and rude, half suggesting a peasant abode, gray and weather-worn, but stoutly resisting the decay to which many a proud castle had fallen a victim. The ascending slope of the mountain formed a picturesque background, and high above a huge peak reared its rocky crest, crowned with snow, lonely and proud.

The interior of the house accorded with its outside. Through a vaulted hall, with a stone floor, a low spacious room was reached which occupied nearly the entire width of the building. The wainscot, brown with age, the gigantic tiled stove, the high-backed chairs, and the heavily-carved oaken cupboards were all plain and simple and showed marks of long years of use. The windows were wide open, affording a magnificent view of the mountains, but the two gentlemen sitting at the table were too earnestly engaged in conversation to pay any heed to the beauties which each moment revealed more fully.

One of them, a man fifty years of age, was a giant

in stature, with a broad chest and powerful limbs. Not a thread of silver as yet streaked his thick hair and fair, full beard; his tanned face beamed with the life and health that characterized his entire figure. His companion was of perhaps the same age, but his spare figure, his sharp features, and his gray hair made him appear much older. His face and the high forehead, already deeply lined, spoke of restless striving and scheming, as well as of the energy necessary for them; there was in his expression a degree of arrogance which was far from prepossessing, and his air and speech conveyed an impression of self-confidence, as of a man accustomed to rule those about him.

"So pray listen to reason, Thurgau," he said, in a tone in which impatience was audible. "Your opposition will do you no good. In any case you will be forced to relinquish your estate."

"I, forced!" exclaimed Thurgau, angrily. "We'll see about that. While I live, not a stone of Wolkenstein shall be touched."

"But it is directly in the way. The big bridge starts from here, and the line of railway goes directly through your property."

"Then alter your cursed line of railway! Carry it where you choose, over the top of the Wolkenstein, for all I care, but let my house alone. No need to talk, Nordheim; I persist in my 'no.'"

Nordheim smiled, half compassionately, half sarcastically: "You seem to have entirely forgotten in your seclusion how to deal with the world and its requirements. Do you actually imagine that an undertaking like ours can be put a stop to, just because the Freiherr von Thurgau chooses to refuse us a few square rods of his land? If you persist, nothing is left us save to

have recourse to our right of compulsion. You know that we have long been empowered to use it."

"Oho, I have rights too!" exclaimed the Freiherr, bringing his fist down heavily upon the table. "I have protested, and shall continue to protest, while I live. Wolkenstein Court shall be left untouched, though the entire railway company with the Herr President Nordheim at their head should band themselves against me."

"But if you are offered double its value——"

"If I were offered a hundred times its value, it would be all the same. I do not bargain for the last of my inheritance. Wolkenstein Court shall not be touched, and there's an end of it!"

"This is your old obstinacy which has so often stood in your way in life," said the president with irritation. "I might have foreseen it; it is far from agreeable to have my own brother-in-law force to extreme measures the company of which I am president."

"That is why you condescended to come up here yourself, for the first time for years," Thurgau said, with a sneer.

"I wanted to try to talk you into a reasonable state of mind, since my letters were of no avail. You surely know how entirely my time is taken up."

"Yes, yes, heaven knows it is! Nothing would induce me to run the perpetual race which you call life. What good do you get out of your millions and your incredible successes? Now here, now there, you are always on the wing, always burdened down with business and responsibility. There's where you get the wrinkles on your forehead and your gray hair. Look at me!" He sat upright and stretched his huge limbs. "I am a full year older than you!"

"Very true ; but then it is not given to every man to live up here with the marmots and shoot chamois. You resigned from the army ten years ago, although your ancient name would have insured you a brilliant career."

"Because the service did not suit me. It never did suit the Thurgaus. You think that is what has brought them down in the world? I can see you do by your sneer. Well, there is not, it is true, much of the old splendour left, but I have at least a roof over my head, and the soil beneath my feet is my own ; here no one has a right to order me about and control me, least of all your cursed railway. No offence, brother-in-law, we will not quarrel over the matter, and neither has a right to reproach the other, for if I am obstinate you are domineering. You hector your precious company until they are almost blind and deaf, and if one of them dares to contradict you he is simply tossed aside neck and crop."

"What do you know about it?" asked Nordheim, piqued by the last words. "As a rule, you trouble yourself very little about our affairs."

"True, but I was talking awhile ago with a couple of engineers who were up here surveying, and who, of course, had no idea of the relationship between us ; they scolded away at a great rate about you and your tyranny, and favouritism. Oh, I heard a deal that was extremely interesting."

The president shrugged his shoulders with an air of indifference : "My appointment of the superintendent for this district was probably distasteful to the gentlemen. They certainly threatened an open revolt because I advanced to be their superior officer a young man of seven-and-twenty who has more in his head than all the rest of them put together."

"But they maintain that he is a fellow who would shun no means, so it might promote his advancement," Thurgau said, bluntly. "You, as president of the company, had nothing to do with the appointment,—the engineer-in-chief alone has the right to appoint his staff."

"Officially it is so, and I do not often bring my influence to bear in his department; when I do so I expect due deference to be paid to my wishes. Enough, Elmhorst is superintendent and will remain so. If it does not suit the gentlemen they can resign their posts; their opinion is of very little consequence.

In his words there was all the arrogant self-assertion of a man accustomed to have his own way, regardless of consequences. Thurgau was about to reply, but at the moment the door opened, or rather was flung wide, and a something made up of drenched clothes and floating curls flew past the president and eagerly embraced the Freiherr; a second something, equally wet and very shaggy, followed, and also rushed towards the master of the house, springing upon him with loud and joyful barks of recognition. The noisy and unexpected intrusion was almost an attack, but Thurgau must have been used to such onslaughts, for he showed no impatience at the damp caresses thus bestowed upon him.

"Here I am, papal" cried a clear girlish voice, "wet as a nixie; we were up on the Wolkenstein all through the storm; just see how we look, Griff and I!"

"Yes, it is plain that you come directly from the clouds," Thurgau said, laughing. "But do you not see, Erna, that we have a visitor? Do you recognize him?"

Erna turned about; she had not perceived the presi-

dent, who had risen and stepped aside upon her entrance, and for a few seconds she seemed uncertain as to his identity, but she finally exclaimed, delightedly, "Uncle Nordheim!" and hurried towards him. He, however, put out his hands and stood on the defensive.

"Pray, pray, my child; you are dripping at every step. You are a veritable water-witch. For heaven's sake do not let the dog come near me! Would you expose me to a rain-storm here in the room?"

Erna laughed, and, taking the dog by the collar, drew him away. Griff showed a decided desire to cultivate an acquaintance with the visitor, which in his dripping condition would hardly have been agreeable. In fact, his young mistress did not look much better; the mountain-shoes which shod her little feet very clumsily, her skirt of some dark woollen stuff, kilted high, and her little black beaver hat, were all dripping wet. She seemed to care very little about it, however, as she tossed her hat upon a chair and stroked back her damp curls.

The girl resembled her father very slightly; her blue eyes and fair hair she had inherited from him, but otherwise there existed not the smallest likeness between the Freiherr's giant proportions and good-humoured but rather expressionless features and the girl of sixteen, who, lithe and slender as a gazelle, revealed, in spite of her stormy entrance, an unconscious grace in every movement. Her face was rosy with the freshness of youth; it could not be called beautiful, at least not yet: the features were still too childish and undeveloped, and there was an expression bordering on waywardness about the small mouth. Her eyes, it is true, were beautiful, reminding one in their blue depths of the colour of the mountain-lakes. Her hair,

confined neither by ribbon nor by net, and dishevelled by the wind, hung about her shoulders in thick masses of curls. She certainly did not look as if she belonged in a drawing-room, she was rather the personification of a fresh spring rain.

"Are you afraid of a few rain-drops, Uncle Nordheim?" she asked. "What would have become of you in the rain-spout to which we were exposed just now? I did not mind it much, but my companion——"

"Why, I should have thought Griff's shaggy hide accustomed to such drenchings," the Freiherr interposed.

"Griff? Oh, I had left him as usual at the sennerin's hut; he cannot climb, and from there one must rival the chamois. I mean the stranger whom I met on the way. He had strayed from the path, and could not find his way down in the mist; if I had not met him, he would be on the Wolkenstein at this moment."

"Yes, these city men," said Thurgau,—“they come up here with huge mountain-staffs, and in brand-new travelling-suits, and behave as if our Alpine peaks were mere child's play; but at the first shower they creep into a rift in the rocks and catch cold. I suppose the fine fellow was in a terrible fright when the storm came up?”

Erna shook her head, but a frown appeared on her forehead.

"No, he was not afraid; he stayed beside me with entire composure while the lightning and rain were at their worst, and in our descent he showed himself courageous, although it was evident he was quite unused to that sort of thing. But he is an odious creature. He laughed when I told him of the mountain-sprite who sends the avalanches down into the valley

every winter, and when I grew angry he observed, with much condescension, 'True, this is the atmosphere for superstition; I had forgotten that.' I wished the mountain-sprite would roll an avalanche down upon his head on the spot, and I told him so."

"You said that to a stranger whom you had met for the first time?" asked the president, who had hitherto listened in silence, with an air of surprise.

Erna tossed her head: "Of course I did! We could not endure him, could we, Griff? You growled at him when he reached the sennerin's hut with me, and you were right,—good dog! But now I really must change my wet clothes; Uncle Nordheim will else catch cold from merely having me near him."

She hurried off as quickly as she had come; Griff tried to follow her, but the door was shut in his face, and so he decided upon another course. He shook from his shaggy hide a shower of drops in every direction, and lay down at his master's feet.

Nordheim took out his pocket-handkerchief and ostentatiously brushed with it his black coat, although not a drop had reached it.

"Forgive me, brother-in-law; I must say that the way in which you allow your daughter to grow up is inexcusable."

"What?" asked Thurgau, apparently extremely surprised that any one could possibly find anything to object to in his child. "What is the matter with the girl?"

"Everything, I should say, that could be the matter with a Fräulein von Thurgau. What a scene we have just witnessed! And you allow her to wander about the mountains alone for hours, making acquaintance with any tourist she may chance to meet."

"Pshaw! she is but a child!"

"At sixteen? It was a great misfortune for her to lose her mother so early, and since then you have positively let her run wild. Of course when a young girl grows up under such circumstances, without instruction, without education——"

"You are mistaken," the Freiherr interrupted him. "When I removed to Wolkenstein Court, after the death of my wife, I brought with me a tutor, the old magister, who died last spring. Erna had instruction from him, and I have brought her up. She is just what I wished her to be; we have no use up here for such a delicate hot-house plant as your Alice. My girl is healthy in body and mind; she has grown up free as a bird of the air, and she shall stay so. If you call that running wild, so be it, for aught I care! My child suits me."

"Perhaps so, but you will not always be the sole ruling force in her life. If Erna should marry——"

"Mar—ry?" Thurgau repeated in dismay.

"Certainly, you must expect her to have lovers, sooner or later."

"The fellow who dares to present himself as such shall have a lesson from me that he'll remember!" roared the Freiherr in a rage.

"You bid fair to be an amiable father-in-law," said Nordheim, dryly. "I should suppose it was a girl's destiny to marry. Do you imagine I shall require my Alice to remain unmarried because she is my only daughter?"

"That is very different," said Thurgau, slowly, "a very different thing. You may love your daughter,—you probably do love her,—but you could give her to some one else with a light heart. I have nothing on

God's earth save my child ; she is all that is left to me, and I will not give her up at any price. Only let the gentlemen to whom you allude come here as suitors ; I will send them home again after a fashion that shall make them forget the way hither."

The president's smile was that of the cold compassion bestowed upon the folly of a child.

"If you continue faithful to your educational theories you will have no cause to fear," he said, rising. "One thing more: Alice arrives at Heilborn to-morrow morning, where I shall await her; the physician has ordered her the baths there, and the mountain-air."

"No human being could ever get well and strong in that elegant and tiresome haunt of fashion," Thurgau declared, contemptuously. "You ought to send the girl up here, where she would have the mountain-air at first hand."

Nordheim's glance wandered about the apartment, and rested with an unmistakable expression upon the sleeping Griff; finally he looked at his brother-in-law: "You are very kind, but we must adhere to the physician's prescriptions. Shall we not see you in the course of a day or two?"

"Of course; Heilborn is hardly two miles away," said the Freiherr, who failed to perceive the cold, forced nature of his brother-in-law's invitation. "I shall certainly come over and bring Erna."

He rose to conduct his guest to his conveyance; the difference of opinion to which he had just given such striking expression was in his eyes no obstacle to their friendly relations as kinsmen, and he bade his brother-in-law farewell with all the frank cordiality native to him. Erna too came fluttering down-stairs like a bird, and all three went out of the house together.

The mountain-wagon which had brought the president to Wolkenstein Court a couple of hours previously—not without some difficulty in the absence of any good road—drove into the court-yard, and at the same moment a young man made his appearance beneath the gate-way and approached the master of the house.

“Good-day, doctor,” cried the Freiherr in his jovial tones, whilst Erna, with the ease and freedom of a child, offered the new-comer her hand. Turning to his brother-in-law, Thurgau added: “This is our *Æsculapius* and physician-in-ordinary. You ought to put your Alice under his care; the man understands his business.”

Nordheim, who had observed with evident displeasure his niece’s familiar greeting of the young doctor, touched his hat carelessly, and scarcely honoured the stranger, whose bow was somewhat awkward, with a glance. He shook hands with his brother-in-law, kissed Erna on the forehead, and got into the vehicle, which immediately rolled away.

“Now come in, Dr. Reinsfeld,” said the Freiherr, who did not apparently regret this departure. “But it occurs to me that you do not know my brother-in-law,—the gentleman who has just driven off.”

“President Nordheim,—I am aware,” replied Reinsfeld, looking after the vehicle, which was vanishing at a turn in the road.

“Extraordinary,” muttered Thurgau. “Everybody knows him, and yet he has not been here for years. It is exactly as if some potentate were driving through the mountains.”

He went into the house; the young physician hesitated a moment before following him, and looked round

for Erna; but she was standing on the low wall that encircled the court-yard, looking after the conveyance as with some difficulty it drove down the mountain.

Dr. Reinsfeld was about twenty-seven years old; he did not possess the Freiherr's gigantic proportions, but his figure was fine, and powerfully knit. He certainly was not handsome, rather the contrary, but there was an undeniable charm in the honest, trustful gaze of his blue eyes and in his face, which carried written on its brow kindness of heart. The young man's manners and bearing, it is true, betrayed entire unfamiliarity with the forms of society, and there was much to be desired in his attire. His gray mountain-jacket and his old beaver hat had seen many a day of tempest and rain, and his heavy mountain-shoes, their soles well studded with nails, showed abundant traces of the muddy mountain-paths. They bore testimony to the fact that the doctor did not possess even a mountain-pony for his visits to his patients,—he went on foot wherever duty called him.

"Well, how are you, Herr Baron?" he asked when the two men were seated opposite each other in the room. "All right again? No recurrence of the last attack?"

"All right," said Thurgau, with a laugh. "I cannot understand why you should make so much of a little dizzy turn. Such a constitution as mine does not give gentlemen of your profession much to do."

"We must not make too light of the matter. At your years you must be prudent," said the young physician. "I hope nothing will come of it, if you only follow my advice,—avoid all excitement, and diet yourself to a degree. I wrote it all down for you."

"Yes, you did, but I shall not pay it any attention."

the Freiherr said, pleasantly, leaning back in his arm-chair.

"But, Herr von Thurgau——"

"Let me alone, doctor! The life that you prescribe for me would be no life at all. I take care of myself! I, accustomed as I am to follow a chamois to the top-most peak of our mountains without any heed of the sun's heat or the winter's snow,—always the first if there is any peril to be encountered,—I give up hunting, drink water, and avoid all agitation like a nervous old maid! Nonsense! I've no idea of anything of the kind."

"I did not conceal from you the grave nature of your attack, nor that it might have dangerous consequences."

"I don't care! Man cannot balk his destiny, and I never was made for such a pitiable existence as you would have me lead. I prefer a quick, happy death."

Reinsfeld looked thoughtful, and said, in an undertone, "In fact, you are right, Baron, but——" He got no further, for Thurgau burst into a loud laugh.

"Now, that's what I call a conscientious physician! When his patient declares that he cares not a snap for his prescriptions, he says 'you are right!' Yes, I am right; you see it yourself."

The doctor would have protested against this interpretation of his words, but Thurgau only laughed more loudly, and Erna made her appearance with Griff, her inseparable companion.

"Uncle Nordheim is safe across the bridge, although it was half flooded," she said. "The engineers all rushed to his assistance and helped to draw the carriage across, after which they drew up in line on each side and bowed profoundly."

She mimicked comically the reverential demeanour

of the officials, but the Freiherr shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"Fine fellows those! They abuse my brother-in-law in every way behind his back, but as soon as he comes in sight they bow down to the ground. No wonder the man is arrogant."

"Papa," said Erna, who had been standing beside her father's chair, and who now put her arm around his neck, "I do not think Uncle Nordheim likes me: he was so cold and formal."

"That is his way," said Thurgau, drawing her towards him. "But he has a great deal of fault to find with you, you romp."

"With Fräulein Erna?" asked Reinsfeld, with as much astonishment and indignation in look and tone as if the matter in question had been high treason.

"Yes; she ought to conduct herself like a Fräulein von Thurgau. Oh, yes, child, awhile ago he offered to have you come to him to be trained for society with his Alice by all sorts of governesses! What do you say to such an arrangement?"

"I do not want to go to my uncle, papa. I will never go away from you. I mean to stay at Wolkenstein Court as long as I live."

"I knew it!" said the Freiherr, triumphantly. "And they insist that you will marry some day,—go off with a perfect stranger and leave your father alone in his old age! We know better, eh, Erna? We two belong together and we will stay together."

He stroked his child's curls with a tenderness pathetic in the bluff, stalwart man, and Erna nestled close to him with passionate ardour. It was plain to see that they belonged together; each was devoted to the other, heart and soul.

CHAPTER II.

A MORNING CALL.

* WELL, Herr Superintendent, you are at your post already? It is one of difficulty and responsibility, especially for a man of your years, but I hope nevertheless that you are quite competent to fulfil its duties."

The young man to whom President Nordheim addressed these words bowed respectfully, but in no wise humbly, as he replied, "I am perfectly aware that I must show myself worthy of the distinction which I owe principally to your influence in my behalf, Herr President."

"Yes, there was much against you," said Nordheim. "First of all, your youth, which was regarded as an obstacle by those in authority, the rather that older and more experienced applicants look upon their rejection as an offence, and finally there was a decided opposition to my interference in your favour. I need not tell you that you must take all these things into account; they will make your position far from an easy one."

"I am prepared for that," Elmhurst replied, quietly, "and I shall not yield a jot to the hostility of my fellow-workers. I have hitherto, Herr President, had no opportunity to express my gratitude to you save by words; I trust I shall be able to show it by deeds at some future time."

His answer seemed to please the president, and, far more graciously than was his wont, he signed to his

favourite to sit down,—for such Elmhorst was already considered in circles that were quite conscious of the value of the president's preference.

The young superintendent-engineer, who, upon this official visit, wore, of course, the livery of the company, was extremely attractive in appearance, tall and slender, with regular, decided features, to which a complexion browned by the sun, and a dark beard and moustache, lent a manly air. Thick brown hair was parted above a broad brow which betokened keen intelligence, and the eyes would have been extremely fine had they not been so cold and grave in expression. They might observe keenly, and perhaps flash with pride and energy, but they could hardly light up with enthusiasm, or glow with the warmer impulses of the heart; there was no youthful fire in their dark depths. The man's manner was simple and calm, perfectly respectful to his superior, but without a shadow of servility.

"I am not quite satisfied with what I see here," Nordheim began again. "The men are taking a great deal of time for the preliminary work, and I doubt if we can begin the construction next year; there is no display of eagerness or energy. I begin to fear that we have made a mistake in putting ourselves into the hands of this engineer-in-chief."

"He is considered a first-class authority," Elmhorst interposed.

"True, but he has grown old, physically and mentally, and such a work as this demands the full vigor of manhood,—a famous name is not all that is required. The undertaking depends greatly upon the conductors of the individual sections, and your section is one of the most important on the entire line."

"The most important, I think. We have every possible natural obstacle to overcome here; I am afraid we shall not always succeed, even with the most exact calculations."

"My opinion precisely; the post requires a man capable of calculating upon the unforeseen, and ready in an emergency to lend a hand himself. I therefore nominated you, and carried through your appointment, in spite of all opposition; it is for you to justify my confidence in you."

"I will justify it," was the decided reply. "You shall not find yourself mistaken in me, Herr President."

"I am seldom deceived in men," said Nordheim, with a searching glance at the young man's countenance, "and of your technical capacity you have given proof sufficient. Your plan for bridging over the Wolkenstein chasm shows genius."

"Herr President——"

"No need to disclaim my praise, I am usually very chary of it; as a former engineer I can judge of such matters, and I repeat, your plan shows genius."

"And yet for a long time it was not only not accepted, it was entirely disregarded," said Elmhurst, with some bitterness. "Had I not conceived the happy idea of requesting a personal interview with you, at which I explained my plans to you, they never would have been accorded the slightest notice."

"Possibly not; talent out at elbows, with difficulty finds a hearing; 'tis the way of the world, and one from which I, myself, suffered in my youth. But one conquers in the end, and you come off conqueror with your present position. I shall know how to maintain you in it if you do your duty. The rest is your own affair."

He rose, and waved his hand in token of dismissal. Elmhorst also rose, but lingered a moment: "May I make a request?"

"Certainly; what is it?"

"A few weeks ago I had the honour in the city of seeing Fräulein Alice Nordheim, and of being hastily presented to her as she was getting into the carriage with you. She is now, I hear, in Heilborn,—may I be permitted to inquire personally after her health?"

Nordheim was startled, and scanned the bold petitioner keenly. He was wont to have none save business relations with his officials, and was considered very exclusive in his choice of associates, and here was this young man, only a simple engineer a short time previously, asking a favour which signified neither more nor less than the *entrée* of the house of the all-powerful president. It seemed to him a little strong; he frowned and said in a very cold tone, "Your request is a rather bold one, Herr—Elmhorst."

"I know it, but Fortune favours the bold."

The words might have offended another patron, but not the man to whom they were spoken. Influential millionaire as he was, Nordheim had enough of flattery and servility, and despised both from the bottom of his soul. This quiet self-possession, not a whit destroyed by his presence, impressed him; he felt it was something akin to his own nature. 'Fortune favours the bold!' It had been his own maxim by which he had mounted the social ladder, and this Elmhorst looked as if he never would be content with remaining on its lower rounds. The frown vanished from his brow, but his eyes remained fixed upon the young engineer's face as if to read his very soul,—his most secret thoughts. After a pause of a few seconds he

said, slowly, "We will admit the proverb to be right this time. Come!"

In Elmhorst's eyes there was a flash of triumph; he bowed low, and followed Nordheim through several rooms to the other wing of the house.

Nordheim was occupying one of the most beautiful and elegant villas in the fashionable spa. Half hidden by the green shade of the shrubberies, it enjoyed a charming prospect of the mountain-range, and its interior was wanting in none of the luxuries to which spoiled and wealthy guests are accustomed. In the drawing-room the glass door alone was open, the jalousies were closed to keep out the glare of sunlight, and in the cool, darkened room sat two ladies.

The elder, who held a book, and was apparently reading, was no longer young. Her dress, from the lace cap covering her gray hair to the hem of her dark silk gown, was scrupulously neat, and she sat up stiff and cool and elegant, an embodiment of the rules of etiquette. The younger, a girl of sixteen at most, a delicate, pale, frail creature, was sitting, or rather reclining, in a large arm-chair. Her head was supported by a silken cushion, and her hands were crossed idly and languidly in the lap of her white, lace-trimmed morning-gown. Her face, although hardly beautiful, was pleasing, but it wore a weary, apathetic expression which made it lifeless when, as at present, the eyes were half closed and the young lady seemed to be dozing.

"Herr Wolfgang Elmhorst," said the president, introducing his companion. "I believe he is not quite a stranger to you, Alice. Frau Baroness Lasberg."

Alice slowly opened her eyes, large brown eyes, which, however, shared the apathetic expression of

her other features. There was not the slightest interest in her glance, and she seemed to remember neither the name nor the person of the young man. Frau von Lasberg, on the other hand, looked surprised. Only Wolfgang Elmhorst and nothing more? Gentlemen without rank or title were not wont to be admitted to the Nordheim circle; there surely must be something extraordinary about this young man, since the president himself introduced him. Nevertheless his courteous bow was acknowledged with frigid formality.

"I cannot expect Fräulein Nordheim to remember me," said Wolfgang, advancing. "Our meeting was a very transient one; I am all the more grateful to the Herr President for his introduction to-day. But I fear Fräulein Nordheim is ill?"

"Only rather fatigued from her journey," the president made answer in his daughter's stead. "How are you to-day, Alice?"

"I feel wretched, papa," the young lady replied in a gentle voice, but one quite devoid of expression.

"The heat of the sun in the narrow valley is insufferable," Frau von Lasberg observed. "This sultry atmosphere always has an unfavourable effect upon Alice; I fear she will not be able to bear it."

"The physicians have ordered her to Heilborn, and we must await the result," said Nordheim, in a tone that was impatient rather than tender. Alice said not a word; her strength seemed exhausted by her short reply to her father's inquiry, and she left it to Frau von Lasberg and her father to continue the conversation.

Elmhorst's share in it was at first a very modest one, but gradually and almost imperceptibly he took the lead, and he certainly understood the art of conver-

sation. His remarks were not commonplaces about the weather and every-day occurrences; he talked of things which might have been thought foreign to the interest of the ladies,—things which had to do with the railway enterprise among the mountains. He described the Wolkenstein, its stupendous proportions, its heights which dominated the entire mountain-range, the yawning abyss which the bridge was to span, the rushing mountain-stream, and the iron road which was to wind through cliffs and forests above streams and chasms. His were no dry descriptions, no technical explanations,—he unrolled a brilliant picture of the gigantic undertaking before his listeners, and he succeeded in entralling them. Frau von Lasberg became some degrees less cool and formal; she even asked a few questions, expressing her interest in the matter, and Alice, although she persisted in her silence, evidently listened, and sometimes bestowed a half-surprised glance upon the speaker.

The president seemed equally surprised by the conversational talent of his *protégé*, with whom, hitherto, he had talked about official and technical matters only. He knew that the young man had been bred in moderate circumstances, and that he was unused to 'society' so called, and here he was in this drawing-room conversing with these ladies as if he had been accustomed to such intercourse all his life. And there was an entire absence in his manner of anything like forwardness; he knew perfectly well how to keep within the bounds assigned by good breeding for a first visit.

In the midst of their conversation a servant appeared, and with a rather embarrassed air announced, "A gentleman calling himself Baron Thurgau wishes——"

"Yes, wishes to speak to his illustrious brother-in-

law," a loud, angry voice interrupted him, as he was thrust aside by a powerful arm. "Thunder and lightning, what sort of a household have you got here, Nordheim? I believe the Emperor of China is more easy of access than you are! We had to break through three outposts, and even then the betagged and betaselled pack would have denied us admittance. You have brought an entire suite with you."

Alice had started in terror at the sound of the stentorian voice, and Frau von Lasberg rose slowly and solemnly in mute indignation, seeming to ask by her looks the meaning of this intrusion. The president too did not appear to approve of this mode of announcement; but he collected himself immediately and advanced to meet his brother-in-law, who was followed by his daughter.

"Probably you did not at first mention your name," he said, "or such a mistake could not have occurred. The servants do not yet know you."

"Well, there would have been no harm in admitting any simple, honest man to your presence," Thurgau growled, still red with irritation. "But that is not the fashion here, apparently; it was only when I added the 'Baron' that they condescended to admit us."

The servant's error was undeniably excusable, for the Freiherr wore his usual mountaineer's garb, and Erna hardly looked like a young Baroness, although she had not donned her storm-costume to-day. She wore a simple gown of some dark stuff, rather more suitable for a mountain ramble than for paying visits, and as simple a straw hat tied over her curls, which were, however, confined to-day in a silken net, against which they evidently rebelled. She seemed to resent their reception even more than did her father, for she

stood beside him with a frown and a haughty curl of the lip, gloomily scanning those present. Behind the pair appeared the inevitable Griff, who had shown his teeth angrily when the servant attempted to shut him out of the room, and who maintained his place in the unshaken conviction that he belonged wherever his mistress was.

The president would have tried to smooth matters, but Thurgau, whose wrath was wont to evaporate as quickly as it was aroused, did not allow him to speak. "There is Alice!" he exclaimed. "God bless you, child, I'm glad to see you again! But, my poor girl, how you look! not a drop of blood in your cheeks. Why, this is pitiful!"

Amid such flattering remarks he approached the young lady to bestow upon her what he considered a tender embrace; but Frau von Lasberg interposed between Alice and himself with, "I beg of you!" uttered in a sharp tone, as if to shield the girl from an assault.

"Come, come, I shall do my niece no harm," Thurgau said, with renewed vexation. "You need not protect her from me as you would a lamb from a wolf. Whom have I the honour of addressing?"

"I am the Baroness Lasberg!" the lady explained, with due emphasis upon the title. Her whole manner expressed frigid reserve, but it availed her nothing here. The Freiherr cordially clasped one of the hands she had extended to ward him off, and shook it until it ached again.

"Extremely happy, madame, extremely so. My name you have heard, and this is my daughter. Come, Erna, why do you stand there so silent? Are you not going to speak to Alice?"

Erna approached slowly, a frown still on her brow, but it vanished entirely at sight of her young cousin lying so weary and pale among her cushions; suddenly with all her wonted eagerness she threw her arms round Alice's neck and cried out, "Poor Alice, I am so sorry you are ill!"

Alice accepted the caress without returning it; but when the blooming, rosy face nestled close to her colourless cheek, when a pair of fresh lips pressed her own, and the warm, tender tones fell on her ear, something akin to a smile appeared upon her apathetic features and she replied, softly, "I am not ill, only tired."

"Pray, Baroness, be less demonstrative," Frau von Lasberg said, coldly. "Alice must be very gently treated; her nerves are extremely sensitive."

"What? Nerves?" said Thurgau. "That's a complaint of the city folks. With us at Wolkenstein Court there are no such things. You ought to come with Alice to us, madame; I'll promise you that in three weeks neither of you will have a single nerve."

"I can readily believe it," the lady replied, with an indignant glance.

"Come, Thurgau, let us leave the children to make acquaintance with each other; they have not seen each other for years," said Nordheim, who, although quite used to his brother-in-law's rough manner, was annoyed by it in the present company. He would have led the way to the next room, but Elmhorst, who during this domestic scene had considerably withdrawn to the recess of a window, now advanced, as if about to take his leave, whereupon the president, of course, presented him to his relative.

Thurgau immediately remembered the name which

he had heard mentioned in no flattering fashion by the comrades of the young superintendent, whose attractive exterior seemed only to confirm the Freiherr in his mistrust of him. Erna too had turned towards the stranger; she suddenly started and retreated a step.

"This is not the first time that I have had the honour of meeting the Baroness Thurgau," said Elmhorst, bowing courteously. "She was kind enough to act as my guide when I had lost my way among the cliffs of the Wolkenstein. Her name, indeed, I hear to-day for the first time."

"Ah, indeed. So this was the stranger whom you met?" growled Thurgau, not greatly edified, it would seem, by this encounter.

"I trust the Baroness was not alone?" Frau von Lasberg inquired, in a tone which betrayed her horror at such a possibility.

"Of course I was alone!" Erna exclaimed, perceiving the reproach in the lady's words, and flaming up indignantly. "I always walk alone in the mountains, with only Griff for a companion. Be quiet, Griff! Lie down!"

Elmhorst had tried to stroke the beautiful animal, but his advances had been met with an angry growl. At the sound of his mistress's voice, however, the dog was instantly silent and lay down obediently at her feet.

"The dog is not cross, I hope?" Nordheim asked, with evident annoyance. "If he is, I must really entreat——"

"Griff is never cross," Erna interposed almost angrily. "He never hurts any one, and always lets strangers pat him, but he does not like this gentleman at all, and——"

"Baroness—I beg of you!" murmured Frau von Lasberg, with difficulty maintaining her formal demeanour. Elmhurst, however, acknowledged Erna's words with a low bow.

"I am excessively mortified to have fallen into disgrace with Herr Griff, and, as I fear, with his mistress also," he declared, "but it really is not my fault. Allow me, ladies, to bid you good-morning."

He approached Alice, beside whom Frau von Lasberg was standing guard, as if to protect her from all contact with these savages who had suddenly burst into the drawing-room, and who could not, unfortunately, be turned out, because, setting aside the relationship, they were Baron and Baroness born.

On the other hand, this young man with the bourgeois name conducted himself like a gentleman. His voice was gentle and sympathetic as he expressed the hope that Fräulein Nordheim would recover her health in the air of Heilborn; he courteously kissed the hand of the elder lady when she graciously extended it to him, and then he turned to the president to take leave of him also, when a most unexpected interruption occurred.

Outside on the balcony, which overhung the garden and was half filled with blossoming shrubs, appeared a kitten, which had probably found its way thither from the garden. It approached the open glass door with innocent curiosity, and, unfortunately, came within the range of Griff's vision. The dog, in his hereditary hostility to the tribe of cats, started up, barking violently, almost overturned Frau von Lasberg, shot past Alice, frightening her terribly, and out upon the balcony, where a wild chase began. The terrified kitten tore hither and thither with lightning-like rapidity without

finding any outlet of escape and with its persecutor in close pursuit; the glass panes of the door rattled, the flower-pots were overturned and smashed, and amidst the confusion were heard the Freiherr's shrill whistle and Erna's voice of command. The dog, young, not fully broken, and eager for the chase, did not obey,—the hurly-burly was frightful.

At last the kitten succeeded in jumping upon the balustrade of the balcony and thence down into the garden. But Griff would not let his prey escape him thus; he leaped after it, overturning as he did so the only flower-pot as yet uninjured, and immediately afterwards there was a terrific barking in the garden, mingled with a child's scream of terror.

All this happened in less than two minutes, and when Thurgau hurried out on the balcony to establish peace it was already too late. Meanwhile, the drawing-room was a scene of indescribable confusion,—Alice had a nervous attack, and lay with her eyes closed in Frau von Lasberg's arms; Elmhurst, with quick presence of mind, had picked up a cologne-bottle and was sprinkling with its contents the fainting girl's temples and forehead, while the president, scowling, pulled the bell to summon the servants. In the midst of all this the two gentlemen and Frau von Lasberg witnessed a spectacle which almost took away their breath. The young Baroness, the Freifräulein von Thurgau, suddenly stood upon the balustrade of the balcony, but only for an instant, before she sprang down into the garden.

This was too much! Frau von Lasberg dropped Alice out of her arms and sank into the nearest arm-chair. Elmhurst found himself necessitated to come to her relief also with cologne, which he sprinkled impartially to the right and to the left.

Below in the garden Erna's interference was very necessary. The child whose screams had caused her to spring from the balcony was a little boy, and he held his kitten clasped in his arms, while before him stood the huge dog, barking loudly, without, however, touching the little fellow. The child was in extreme terror, and went on screaming until Erna seized the dog by the collar and dragged him away.

Baron Thurgau, meanwhile, stood quietly on the balcony observing the course of affairs. He knew that the child would not be hurt, for Griff was not at all vicious. When Erna returned to the house with the culprit, now completely subdued, while the child unharmed ran off with his kitten, the Freiherr turned and called out in stentorian tones to his brother-in-law in the drawing-room, "There! did I not tell you, Nordheim, that my Erna was a grand girl?"

CHAPTER III.

EXPLANATORY.

PRESIDENT NORDHEIM belonged to the class of men who owe their success to themselves. The son of a petty official, with no means of his own, he had educated himself as an engineer, and had lived in very narrow circumstances until he suddenly appeared before the public with a technical invention which attracted the attention of the entire profession. The first mountain-railway had just been projected, and the young, obscure engineer had devised a locomotive

which could drag the trains up the heights. The invention was as clever as it was practical; it instantly distanced all competing devices, and was adopted by the company, which finally purchased the patent from the inventor at a price which then seemed a fortune to him, and which certainly laid the foundation of his future wealth, for he took rank immediately among men of enterprise.

Contrary to expectation, however, Nordheim did not pursue the path in which he had made so brilliant a *début*; strangely enough, he seemed to lose interest in it, and adopted another, although kindred, career. He undertook the formation and the financial conduct of a large building association, of which in a few years he made an enormous success, meanwhile increasing his own property tenfold.

Other projects were the consequence of this first undertaking, and with the increase of his means the magnitude of his schemes increased, and it became clear that this was the field for the exercise of his talents. He was not a man to ponder and pore for years over technical details,—he needed to plunge into the life of the age, to venture and contrive, making all possible interests subservient to his success, and developing in all directions his great talent for organization.

In his restless activity he never failed to select the right man for the right place; he overcame all obstacles, sought and found sources of help everywhere, and fortune stood his energy in stead. The enterprises of which Nordheim was the head were sure to succeed, and while he himself became a millionaire, his influence in all circles with which he had any connection was incalculable.

The president's wife had died a few years since,—a loss which was not especially felt by him, for his marriage had not been a very happy one. He had married when he was a simple engineer, and his quiet, unpretending wife had not known how to accommodate herself to his growing fortunes and to play the part of *grande dame* to her husband's satisfaction. Then too the son which she bore him, and whom he had hoped to make the heir of his schemes, died when an infant. Alice was born some years afterwards, a delicate, sickly child, for whose life the greatest anxiety was always felt, and whose phlegmatic temperament was antagonistic to the vivid energy of her father's nature. She was his only daughter, his future heiress, and as such he surrounded her with every luxury that wealth could procure, but she made no part of his life, and he was glad to intrust her education and herself to the Baroness Lasberg.

Nordheim's only sister, who had lived beneath his roof, had bestowed her hand upon the Freiherr von Thurgau, then a captain in the army. Her brother, who had just achieved his first successes, would have preferred another suitor to the last scion of an impoverished noble family, who possessed nothing save his sword and a small estate high up among the mountains, but, since the couple loved each other tenderly and there was no objection to be made to Thurgau personally, the brother's consent was not withheld.

The young people lived very modestly, but in the enjoyment of a domestic happiness quite lacking in Nordheim's wealthy household, and their only child, the little Erna, grew up in the broad sunshine of love and content. Unfortunately, Thurgau lost his wife after six years of married life, and, sensitive as he was,

the unexpected blow so crushed him that he determined to leave the army, and to retire from the world entirely. Nordheim, whose restless ambition could not comprehend such a resolve, combated it most earnestly, but in vain; his brother-in-law resisted him with all the obstinacy of his nature. He quitted the service in which he had attained the rank of major, and retired with his daughter to Wolkenstein Court, the modest income from which, joined to his pension, sufficing for his simple needs.

Since then there had been a certain amount of estrangement between the brothers-in-law; the mediating influence of the wife and sister was lacking, and in addition their homes were very wide apart. They saw each other rarely, and letters were interchanged still more rarely until the construction of the mountain-railway and the necessity for purchasing Thurgau's estate brought about a meeting.

CHAPTER IV.

THE LAST THURGAU.

ABOUT a week had passed since the visit to Heilborn, when Dr. Reinsfeld again took his way to Wolkenstein Court, but on this occasion he was not alone, for beside him walked Superintendent Elmhorst.

"I never should have dreamed, Wolfgang, that fate would bring us together again here," said the young physician, gaily. "When we parted two years ago, you jeered at me for going into 'the wilderness,' as you

were pleased to express yourself, and now you have sought it yourself."

"To bring cultivation to this wilderness," Wolfgang continued the sentence. "You indeed seem very comfortable here; you have fairly taken root in the miserable mountain-village where I discovered you, Benno; I am working here for my future."

"I should think you might be contented with your present," Benno observed. "A superintendent-engineer at twenty-seven,—it would be hard to surpass that. Between ourselves, your comrades are furious at your appointment. Take care, Wolf, or you will find yourself in a wasps'-nest."

"Do you imagine I fear to be stung? I know all you say is true, and I have already given the gentlemen to understand that I am not inclined to tolerate obstacles thrown in my way, and that they must pay me the respect due to a superior. If they want war, they shall have it!"

"Yes, you were always pugnacious; I never could endure to be perpetually upon a war-footing with those about me."

"I know it; you are the same peace-loving old Benno that you always were, who never could say a cross word to any one, and who consequently was maltreated by his beloved fellow-beings whenever an opportunity offered. How often have I told you that you never could get on in the world so! and to get on in the world is what we all desire."

"You certainly are striding on in seven-league boots," said Reinsfeld, dryly. "You are the acknowledged favourite, they say, of the omnipotent President Nordheim. I saw him again lately at Wolkenstein Court."

"Saw him again? Did you know him before?"

"Certainly, in my boyhood. He and my father were friends and fellow-students; Nordheim used to come to our house daily; I have sat upon his knee often enough when he spent the evening with us."

"Indeed? Well, I hope you reminded him of it when you met him."

"No; Baron Thurgau did not mention my name——"

"And of course you did not do so either," said Wolfgang, laughing. "Just like you! Chance brings you into contact with an influential man whose mere word would procure you an advantageous position, and you never even tell him your name! I shall repair your omission; the first time I see the president I shall tell him——"

"Pray do no such thing, Wolf," Benno interrupted him. "You had better say nothing about it."

"And why not?"

"Because—the man has risen to such a height in life that he might not like to be reminded of the time when he was a simple engineer."

"You do him injustice. He is proud of his humble origin, as all clever men are, and he could not fail to be pleased to be reminded of an early friend."

Reinsfeld gently shook his head. "I am afraid the memory would be a painful one. Something happened later,—I never knew what,—I was a boy at the time; but I know that the breach was complete. Nordheim never came again to our house, and my father avoided even the mention of his name; they were entirely estranged."

"Then of course you could not reckon upon his favour," said Elmhorst, in a disappointed tone. "The president seems to me to be one who never forgives a supposed offence."

"Yes, they say he has grown extremely haughty and domineering. I wonder that you can get along with him. You are not a man to cringe."

"That is precisely why he likes me. I leave cringing and fawning to servile souls who may perhaps thus procure some subordinate position. Whoever wishes really to rise must hold his head erect and keep his eyes fixed upon the goal above him, or he will continue to crawl on the ground."

"I suppose your goal is a couple of millions," Benno said, ironically. "You never were very modest in your plans for the future. What do you wish to be? The president of your company?"

"Perhaps so at some future time; for the present only his son-in-law."

"I thought there was something of the kind in your mind!" exclaimed Benno, bursting into a laugh. "Of course you are sure to be right, Wolf; but why not rather pluck down yonder sun from the sky? It would be quite as easy."

"Do you fancy I am in jest?" asked Wolfgang, coolly.

"Yes, I do take that liberty, for you cannot be serious in aspiring to the daughter of a man whose wealth and consequence are almost proverbial. Nordheim's heiress may choose among any number of Freiherrns and Counts, if indeed she does not prefer a millionaire."

"Then all the Freiherrns and Counts must be outdone," said the young engineer, calmly, "and that is what I propose to do."

Dr. Reinsfeld suddenly paused and looked at his friend with some anxiety; he even made a slight movement as if to feel his pulse.

"Then you are either a little off your head or in

love," he remarked, with decision. "For a lover nothing is impossible, and this visit to Heilborn seems to be fraught with destiny for you. My poor boy, this is very sad."

"In love?" Wolfgang repeated, a smile of ineffable contempt curling his lip. "No, Benno, you know I never have either time or inclination to think of love, and now less than ever. But do not look so shocked, as if I were talking high treason. I give you my word that Alice Nordheim, if she marries me, shall never repent it. She shall have the most attentive and considerate of husbands."

"Indeed you must forgive me for finding all this calculation most sordid," the young physician burst forth indignantly. "You are young and gifted; you have attained a position for which hundreds would envy you, and which relieves you from all care; the future lies open before you, and all you think of is the pursuit of a wealthy wife. For shame, Wolfgang!"

"My dear Benno, you do not understand," Wolfgang declared, enduring his friend's reproof with great serenity. "You idealists never comprehend that we must take into account human nature and the world. You will, of course, marry for love, spend your life slaving laboriously in some obscure country town to procure bread for your wife and children, and at last sink noiselessly into the grave with the edifying consciousness that you have been true to your ideal. I am of another stripe,—I demand of life everything or nothing."

"Well, then, in heaven's name win it by your own exertions!" exclaimed Benno, growing every moment more and more indignant. "Your grand model, President Nordheim, did it."

"He certainly did, but it took him more than twenty

years. We are now slowly and laboriously plodding up this mountain-road in the sweat of our brows. Look at that winged fellow there!" He pointed to a huge bird of prey circling above the abyss. "His wings will carry him in a few minutes to the summit of the Wolkenstein. Yes, it must be fine to stand up there and see the whole world at his feet, and to be near the sun. I do not choose to wait for it until I am old and gray. I wish to mount *now*, and, rely upon it, I shall dare the flight sooner or later."

He drew himself up to his full height; his dark eyes flashed, his fine features were instinct with energy and ambition. The man impressed you as capable of venturing a flight of which others would not even dream.

There was a sudden rustling among the larches on the side of the road, and Griff came bounding down from above, and leaped about the young physician in expectation of the wonted caress. His mistress also appeared on the height, following the course which the dog had taken, springing down over stones and roots of trees, directly through the underbrush, until at last, with glowing cheeks, she reached the road.

Frau von Lasberg would certainly have found some satisfaction in the manner in which the greeting of the Herr Superintendent was returned, with all the cool dignity becoming a Baroness Thurgau, while a contemptuous glance was cast at the elegance of the young man's costume.

Elmhorst wore to-day an easy, loose suit bearing some similitude to the dress of a mountaineer, and very like that of his friend, but it became him admirably; he looked like some distinguished tourist making an expedition with his guide. Dr. Reinsfeld with his negligent carriage certainly showed to disadvantage

beside that tall, slender figure; his gray jacket and his hat were decidedly weather-worn, but that evidently gave him no concern. His eyes sparkled with pleasure at sight of the young girl, who greeted him with her wonted cordial familiarity.

"You are coming to us, Herr Doctor, are you not?" she asked.

"Of course, Fräulein Erna; are you all well?"

"Papa was not well this morning, but he has nevertheless gone shooting. I have been to meet him with Griff, but we could not find him; he must have taken another way home."

She joined the two gentlemen, who now left the mountain-road and took the somewhat steep path leading to Wolkenstein Court. Griff seemed scarcely reconciled to the presence of the young engineer: he greeted him with a growl and showed his teeth.

"What is the matter with Griff?" Reinsfeld asked. "He is usually kindly and good-humoured with everybody."

"He does not seem to include me in his universal philanthropy," said Elmhorst, with a shrug. "He has made me several such declarations of war, and his good humour cannot always be depended upon; he stirred up a terrible uproar in Heilborn, in the Herr President's drawing-room, where Fräulein von Thurgau achieved a deed of positive heroism in comforting a little child whom the dog had nearly frightened to death."

"And, meanwhile, Herr Elmhorst applied himself to the succour of the fainting ladies," Erna said, ironically. "Upon my return to the drawing-room I observed his courteous attentions to both Alice and Frau von Lasberg,—how impartially he deluged both with cologne. Oh, it was diverting in the extreme!"

She laughed merrily. For an instant Elmhurst compressed his lips with an angry glance at the girl, but the next he rejoined politely: "You took such instant possession of the heroic part in the drama, Fräulein von Thurgau, that nothing was left for me but my insignificant *rôle*. You cannot accuse me of timidity after meeting me upon the Wolkenstein, although in my entire ignorance of the locality I did not reach the summit."

"And you never will reach it," Reinsfeld interposed. "The summit is inaccessible; even the boldest mountaineers are checked by those perpendicular walls, and more than one foolhardy climber has forfeited his life in the attempt to ascend them."

"Does the mountain-sprite guard her throne so jealously?" Elmhurst asked, laughing. "She seems to be a most energetic lady, tossing about avalanches as if they were snowballs, and requiring as many human sacrifices yearly as any heathen goddess."

He looked up to the Wolkenstein,* which justified its title: while all the other mountain-summits were defined clearly against the sky, its top was hidden in white mists.

"You ought not to jest about it, Wolfgang," said the young physician, with some irritation. "You have never yet spent an autumn and winter here, and you do not know her, our wild mountain-sprite, the fearful elemental force of the Alps, which only too frequently menaces the lives and the dwellings of the poor mountaineers. She is feared, not without reason, here in her realm; but you seem to have become quite familiar with the legend."

* "Cloud-stone."

"Fräulein von Thurgau had the kindness to make me acquainted with the stern dame," said Wolfgang. "She did indeed receive us very ungraciously on the threshold of her palace, with a furious storm, and I was not allowed the privilege of a personal introduction."

"Take care,—you might have to pay dearly for the favour!" exclaimed Erna, irritated by his sarcasm. Elmhurst's mocking smile was certainly provoking.

"Fräulein von Thurgau, you must not expect from me any consideration for mountain-sprites. I am here for the express purpose of waging war against them. The industries of the nineteenth century have nothing in common with the fear of ghosts. Pray do not look so indignant. Our railway is not going over the Wolkenstein, and your mountain-sprite will remain seated upon her throne undisturbed. Of course she cannot but behold thence how we take possession of her realm and girdle it with our chains. But I have not the remotest intention of interfering with your faith. At *your* age it is quite comprehensible."

He could not have irritated his youthful antagonist more deeply than by these words, which so distinctly assigned her a place among children. They were the most insulting that could be addressed to the girl of sixteen, and they had their effect. Erna stood erect, as angry and determined as if she herself had been threatened with fetters; her eyes flashed as she exclaimed, with all the wayward defiance of a child, 'I wish the mountain-sprite would descend upon her wings of storm from the Wolkenstein and show you her face,—you would not ask to see it again!'

With this she turned and flew, rather than ran, across the meadow, with Griff after her. The slender

figure, its curls unbound again to-day, vanished in a few minutes within the house. Wolfgang paused and looked after her; the sarcastic smile still hovered upon his lips, but there was a sharp tone in his voice.

"What is Baron Thurgau thinking of, to let his daughter grow up so? She would be quite impossible in civilized surroundings; she is barely tolerable in this mountain wilderness."

"Yes, she has grown up wild and free as an Alpine rose," said Benno, whose eyes were still fixed upon the door behind which Erna had disappeared. Elmhorst turned suddenly and looked keenly at his friend.

"You are actually poetical! Are you touched there?"

"I?" asked Benno, surprised, almost dismayed. "What are you thinking of?"

"I only thought it strange to have you season your speech with imagery,—it is not your way. Moreover, your 'Alpine rose' is an extremely wayward, spoiled child; you will have to educate her first."

The words were not uttered as an innocent jest; they had a harsh, sarcastic flavour, and apparently offended the young physician, who replied, irritably, "No more of this, Wolf! Rather tell me what takes you to Wolkenstein Court. You wish to speak with the Freiherr?"

"Yes; but our interview can hardly be an agreeable one. You know that we need the estate for our line of railway; it was refused us, and we had to fall back upon our right of compulsion. The obstinate old Baron was not content: he protested again and again, and refused to allow a survey to be made upon his soil. The man positively fancies that his 'no' will avail him. Of course his protest was laid upon the table, and since the time of probation granted him has expired and we

are in possession, I am to inform him that the preliminary work is about to begin."

Reinsfeld had listened in silence with an extremely grave expression, and his voice showed some anxiety as he said, "Wolf, let me beg you not to go about this business with your usual lack of consideration. The Freiherr is really not responsible on this head. I have taken pains again and again to explain to him that his opposition must be fruitless, but he is thoroughly convinced that no one either can or will take from him his inheritance. He is attached to it with every fibre of his heart, and if he really must relinquish it, I am afraid it will go nigh to kill him."

"Not at all! He will yield like a reasonable man as soon as he sees the unavoidable necessity. I certainly shall be duly considerate, since he is the president's brother-in-law; otherwise I should not have come hither to-day, but have set the engineers to work. Nordheim wishes that everything should be done to spare the old man's feelings, and so I have undertaken the affair myself."

"There will be a scene," said Benno. "Baron Thurgau is the best man in the world, but incredibly passionate and violent when he thinks his rights infringed upon. You do not know him yet."

"You mistake; I have the honour of knowing him, and his primitive characteristics. He gave me an opportunity of observing them at Heilborn, and I am prepared to-day to meet with the roughest usage. But you are right; the man is irresponsible in matters of grave importance, and I shall treat him accordingly."

They had now reached the house, which they entered. Thurgau had just come in; his gun still lay on the table, and beside it a couple of moor-fowl, the

result of his morning's sport. Erna had probably advised him of the coming visitors, for he showed no surprise at sight of the young superintendent.

"Well, doctor," he called out to Reinsfeld, with a laugh, "you are just in time to see how disobedient I have been. There lie my betrayers!" He pointed to his gun and the trophies of his chase.

"Your looks would have informed me," Reinsfeld replied, with a glance at the Freiherr's crimson, heated face. "Moreover, you were not well this morning, I hear."

He would have felt Thurgau's pulse, but the hand was withdrawn: "Time enough for that after a while; you bring me a guest."

"I have taken the liberty of calling upon you, Herr von Thurgau," said Wolfgang, approaching; "and if I am not unwelcome——"

"As a man you are certainly welcome, as a superintendent-engineer you are not," the Freiherr declared, after his blunt fashion. "I am glad to see you, but not a word of your cursed railway, I entreat, or, in spite of the duties of hospitality, I shall turn you out of doors."

He placed a chair for his guest and took his own accustomed seat. Elmhorst saw at a glance how difficult his errand would be; he felt as a tiresome burden the consideration he was compelled by circumstances to pay, but the burden must be shouldered, and so he began at first in a jesting tone.

"I am aware of what a fierce foe you are to our enterprise. My office is the worst of recommendations in your eyes; therefore I did not venture to come alone, but brought my friend with me as a protection."

"Dr. Reinsfeld is a friend of yours?" asked Thurgau, in whose estimation the young official seemed suddenly to rise.

"A friend of my boyhood; we were at the same school, and afterwards studied at the same university, although our professions differed. I hunted up Benno as soon as I came here, and I trust we shall always be good comrades."

"Yes, we all lived here very pleasantly so long as we were by ourselves," the Freiherr said, aggressively. "When you came here with your cursed railway the worry began, and when the shrieking and whistling begin there will be an end of comfort and quiet."

"Now, papa, you are transgressing your own rule and talking of the railway," Erna cried, laughing. "But you must come with me, Herr Doctor. I want to show you what my cousin Alice has sent me from Heilborn; it is charming."

With the eager impatience of a child, who cannot wait to display its treasures, she carried off the young physician into the next room, thus giving the Herr Superintendent fresh occasion to disapprove of her education, or rather of the want of it. On this point he quite agreed with Frau Lasberg. What sort of way was this to behave towards a young man, were he even ten times a physician and the friend of the family!

Benno as he followed her glanced anxiously at the two left behind; he knew what topic would now be discussed, but he relied upon his friend's talent for diplomacy, and, moreover, the door was left open. If the tempest raged too fiercely, he might interfere.

"Yes, yes, the matter cannot be avoided," the Freiherr growled, and Elmhorst, glad to come to business, took up his words.

"You are quite right, Herr Baron, it will not be ignored, and on peril of your fulfilling your threat and really turning me out of doors, I must present myself to you as the agent of the railway company intrusted with imparting to you certain information. The measurements and surveys upon the Wolkenstein estate cannot possibly be delayed any longer, and the engineers will go to work here in the course of a few days."

"They will do no such thing!" Thurgau exclaimed, angrily. "How often must I repeat that I will not allow anything of the kind upon my property!"

"Upon your property? The estate is no longer your property," said Elmhorst, calmly. "The company bought it months ago, and the purchase-money has been lying ready ever since. That business was finished long ago."

"Nothing has been finished!" shouted the Freiherr, his irritation increasing. "Do you imagine I care a button for judgments that outrage all justice, and which your company procured God only knows by what rascality? Do you suppose I am going to leave my house and home to make way for your locomotives? Not one step will I stir, and if——"

"Pray do not excite yourself thus, Herr von Thurgau," Wolfgang interrupted him. "At present there is no idea of driving you away,—it is only that the preliminary surveys must be begun; the house itself will remain entirely at your disposal until next spring."

"Very kind of you!" Thurgau laughed, bitterly. "Till next spring! And what then?"

"Then, of course, it must go."

The Freiherr was about to burst forth again, but there was something in the young man's cool compo-

sure that forced him to control himself. He made an effort to do so, but his colour deepened and his breath was short and laboured, as he said, roughly,—

“Does that seem to you a matter ‘of course’? But what can you know of the devotion a man feels for his inheritance? You belong, like my brother-in-law, to the century of steam. He builds himself three—four palaces, each more gorgeous than its predecessor, and in none of them is he at home. He lives in them one day and sells them the next, as the whim takes him. Wolkenstein Court has been the home of the Thurgaus for two centuries, and shall remain so until the last Thurgau closes his eyes, rely——”

He broke off in the midst of his sentence, and, as if suddenly attacked by vertigo, grasped the table, but it was only for a few seconds; angry, as it were, at the unwonted weakness, he stood erect again and went on with ever-increasing bitterness: “We have lost all else; we did not understand how to bargain and to hoard, and gradually all has vanished save the old nest where stood the cradle of our line; to that we have held fast through ruin and disaster. We would sooner have starved than have relinquished it. And now comes your railway, and threatens to raze my house to the ground, to trample upon rights hundreds of years old, and to take from me what is mine by the law of justice and of God! Only try it! I say no,—and again no. It is my last word.”

He did indeed look ready to make good his refusal with his life, and another man might either have been silent or have postponed further discussion. But Wolfgang had no idea of anything of the kind; he had undertaken to bring the matter to a conclusion, and he persisted.

"Those mountains outside," he said, gravely, "have been standing longer than Wolkenstein Court, and the forests are more firmly rooted in the soil than are you in your home, and yet they must yield. I am afraid Herr von Thurgau, that you have no conception of the gigantic nature of our undertaking, of the means at its disposal, and of the obstacles it must overcome. We penetrate rocks and forests, divert rivers from their course, and bridge across abysses. Whatever is in our path must give way. We come off victorious in our battle with the elements. Ask yourself if the will of one man can bar our progress."

A pause of a few seconds ensued. Thurgau made no reply; his furious anger seemed dissipated by the invincible composure of his opponent, who confronted him with perfect respect and an entire adherence to courtesy. But his clear voice had an inexorable tone, and the look which encountered that of the Freiherr with such cold resolve seemed to cast a spell upon Thurgau. He had hitherto shown himself entirely impervious to all persuasion, all explanation; he had, with all the obstinacy of his character, intrenched himself behind his rights, as impregnable, in his estimation, as the mountains themselves. To-day for the first time it occurred to him that his antagonism might be shattered, that he might be forced to succumb to a power that had laid its iron grasp thus upon the mountains. He leaned heavily upon the table again and struggled for breath, while speech seemed denied him.

"You may rest assured that we shall proceed with all possible regard for you," Wolfgang began again. "The preliminary work which we are about to undertake will scarcely disturb you, and during the winter you will be entirely unmolested; the construction of

the road will not begin until the spring, and then, of course——”

“I must yield, you think,” Thurgau interposed, hoarsely.

“Yes, you *must*, Herr Baron,” said Elmhorst, coldly.

The fateful word, the truth of which instantly sank into his consciousness, robbed the Freiherr of the last remnant of composure; he rebelled against it with a violence that was almost terrifying, and that might well have caused a doubt as to his mental balance.

“But I will not,—will not, I tell you!” he gasped, almost beside himself. “Let rocks and mountains make way before you, *I* will not yield. Have a care of our mountains, lest, when you are so arrogantly interfering with them, they rush down upon you and shatter all your bridges and structures like reeds. I should like to stand by and see the accursed work a heap of ruins; I should like——”

He did not finish his sentence, but convulsively clutched at his breast; his last word died away in a kind of groan, and on the instant the mighty frame fell prostrate as if struck by lightning.

“Good God!” exclaimed Dr. Reinsfeld, who had appeared at the door of the next room just as the last sentences were being uttered, and who now hurried in. But Erna was before him; she first reached her father, and threw herself down beside him with a cry of terror.

“Do not be distressed, Fräulein Erna,” said the young physician, gently pushing her aside, while with Elmhorst’s help he raised the unconscious man and laid him on the sofa. “It is a fainting-fit,—an attack of vertigo such as the Herr Baron had a few weeks ago. He will recover from this too.”

The young girl had followed him, and stood beside him with her hands convulsively clasped and her eyes riveted upon the face of the speaker. Perhaps she saw there something that contradicted the consoling words.

"No, no!" she gasped. "You are deceiving me; this is something else! Papa! papa! it is I. Do you not know your Erna?"

Benno made no rejoinder, but tore open Thurgau's coat; Elmhorst would have helped him, but Erna thrust away his hand with violence.

"Do not touch him!" she exclaimed, in half-stifled accents. "You have killed him, you have brought ruin to our household. Leave him! I will not let you even touch his hand!"

Wolfgang involuntarily recoiled and looked in dismay that was almost terror at the girl, who at this moment was no longer a child. She had thrown herself before her father with outspread arms as if to shield and defend him, and her eyes flashed with savage hatred as though she were confronting a mortal foe.

"Go, Wolfgang," Reinsfeld said in a low tone, as he led him away. "The poor child in her anguish is unjust, and, moreover, you must not stay. The Baron may possibly recover consciousness, and if so he must not see you."

"May recover?" Elmhorst repeated. "Do you fear——"

"The worst! Go, and send old Vroni here; she must be somewhere in the house. Wait outside, and I will bring you tidings as soon as possible."

With these whispered words he conducted his friend to the door. Wolfgang silently obeyed; he sent into the room the old maid-servant, whom he found in the hall, and then went out into the open air, but there

was a dark cloud on his brow. Who could have foreseen such an issue!

A quarter of an hour might have elapsed, when Benno Reinsfeld again made his appearance. He was very pale, and his eyes, usually so clear, were suffused.

"Well?" Wolfgang asked, quickly.

"It is all over!" the young physician replied in an undertone. "A stroke of apoplexy, undoubtedly mortal. I saw that at once."

Wolfgang was apparently unprepared for this reply; his lips quivered as he said in a strained voice, "The affair is intensely painful, Benno, although I am not in the least to blame. I went to work with the greatest caution. The president must be informed."

"Certainly; he is the only near relative, so far as I know. I shall stay with the poor child, who is suffering intensely. Will you undertake to send a messenger to Heilborn?"

"I will drive over myself to inform Nordheim. Farewell."

"Farewell," said Benno, as he returned to the house.

Wolfgang turned to go, but suddenly paused and walked slowly to the window, which was half open.

Within the room Erna was on her knees, with her hands clasped about her father's body. The passionate man who had been standing here but one short quarter of an hour ago in full vigour, obstinately resisting a necessity, now lay motionless, all unconscious of the despairing tears of his orphan child. Fate had decreed that his words should be true; Wolkenstein Court had remained in the possession of the ancient race whose cradle it had been until the last Thurgau had closed his eyes forever.

CHAPTER V.

THE LOVER AND THE SUITOR.

THE house which President Nordheim occupied in the capital bore abundant testimony in its princely magnificence to the wealth of its possessor. It reared its palatial proportions in the most fashionable quarter of the city, and had been built by one of the first architects of the day; there was lavish splendour in its interior arrangements, and a throng of obsequious lackeys was always at hand; in short, nothing was wanting that could minister to the luxurious life of its inmates.

At the head of the household the Baroness Lasberg had held sway for years. Widowed and without means, she had been quite willing to accept such a position in the establishment of the wealthy parvenu to whom she had been recommended by some one of her high-born relatives. Here she was perfectly free to rule as she pleased, for Nordheim, with all his strength of will, could not but regard it as a great convenience to have a lady of undoubted birth and breeding control his servants, receive his guests, and supply the place of mother to his daughter and niece. For three years Erna von Thurgau had now been living beneath the roof of her uncle, who was also her guardian, and who had taken her to his home immediately after the death of her father.

The president was in his study, talking with a gentleman seated opposite him, one of the first lawyers in the city and the legal adviser of the railway company

of which Nordheim was president. He seemed also to belong among the intimates of the household, for the conversation was conducted upon a footing of familiarity, although it concerned chiefly business matters.

"You ought to discuss this with Elmhorst personally," said the president. "He can give you every information upon the subject."

"Is he here?" asked the lawyer, in some surprise.

"He has been here since yesterday, and will probably stay for a week."

"I am glad to hear it; our city seems to possess special attractions for the Herr Superintendent; he is often here, it seems to me."

"He certainly is, and in accordance with my wishes. I desire to be more exactly informed with regard to certain matters than is possible by letter. Moreover, Elmhorst never leaves his post unless he is certain that he can be spared; of that you may be sure, Herr Gersdorf."

Herr Gersdorf, a man of about forty, very fine-looking, with a grave, intellectual face, seemed to think his words had been misunderstood, for he smiled rather ironically as he rejoined, "I certainly do not doubt Herr Elmhorst's zeal in the performance of duty. We all know he would be more apt to do too much than too little. The company may congratulate itself upon having secured in its service so much energy and ability."

"It certainly is not owing to the company that it is so," said Nordheim, with a shrug. "I had to contest the matter with energy when I insisted upon his nomination, and his position was at first made so difficult for him, that any other man would have resigned it. He met with determined hostility on all sides."

"But he very soon overcame it," said Gersdorf, dryly. "I remember the storm that raged among his fellow-officials when he assumed authority over them, but they gradually quieted down. The Herr Superintendent is a man of unusual force of character, and has contrived to gather all the reins into his own hand in the course of the last three years. It is pretty well known now that he will tolerate no one as his superior or even equal in authority, save only the engineer-in-chief, who is now entirely upon his side."

"I do not blame him for his ambition," the president said, coolly. "Whoever wishes to rise must force his way. My judgment did not play me false when it induced me to confirm in so important an office, in spite of all opposition, a man so young. The engineer-in-chief was prejudiced against him, and only yielded reluctantly. Now he is glad to have so capable a support; and as for the Wolkenstein bridge,—Elmhorst's own work,—he may well take first rank upon its merits."

"The bridge promises to be a masterpiece indeed," Gersdorf assented. "A magnificently bold structure; it will doubtless be the finest thing in the entire line of railway. So you wish me to speak with the superintendent himself; shall I find him at his usual hotel?"

"No, at present you will find him here. I have invited him to stay with us this time."

"Ah, indeed?" Gersdorf smiled. He knew that officials of Elmhorst's rank were sometimes obliged to await Nordheim's pleasure for hours in his ante-chamber; this young man had been invited to be a guest beneath his roof. Still more wonderful stories were told of his liking for Elmhorst, who had been his favourite from the first.

For the present, however, the lawyer let the matter

drop, contenting himself with remarking that he would see Herr Elmhorst shortly. He had other and more important affairs in his head apparently, for he took his leave of the president rather absently, and seemed in no hurry to seek out the young engineer; the card which he gave to the servant in the hall was for the ladies of the house, whom he asked to see.

The reception-rooms were in the second story, where Frau von Lasberg was enthroned in the drawing-room in all her wonted state. Alice was seated near her, very little changed by the past three years. She was still the same frail, pale creature, with a weary, listless expression on her regular features,—a hot-house plant to be guarded closely from every draught of air, an object of unceasing care and solicitude for all around her. Her health seemed to be more firmly established, but there was not a gleam of the freshness or enthusiasm of youth in her colourless face.

There was no want of them, however, to be detected in the young lady seated beside the Baroness Lasberg, a graceful little figure in a most becoming walking-suit of dark blue trimmed with fur. A charming, rosy face looked out from beneath her blue velvet hat; the eyes were dark, and sparkling with mischief, and a profusion of little black curls showed above them. She laughed and talked incessantly with all the vivacity of her eighteen years.

"Such a pity that Erna is out!" she exclaimed. "I had something very important to discuss with her. Not a syllable of it shall you hear, Alice; it is to be a surprise for your birthday. I hope we are to have dancing at your ball?"

"I hardly think so," said Alice, indifferently. "This is March, you know."

"But the middle of winter, nevertheless. It snowed only this morning, and dancing is always delightful." As she spoke, her little feet moved as if ready for an instant proof of her preference. Frau von Lasberg looked at them with disapprobation, and remarked, coldly,—

"I believe you have danced a great deal this winter, Baroness Molly."

"Not nearly enough," the little Baroness declared. "How I pity poor Alice for being forbidden to dance! It is good to enjoy one's youth; when you're married there's an end of it. 'Marry and worry,' our old nurse used to say, and then burst into tears and talk of her dear departed. A mournful maxim. Do you believe in it, Alice?"

"Alice bestows no thought upon such matters," the old lady observed, severely. "I must frankly confess to you, my dear Molly, that this topic seems to me quite unbecoming."

"Oh!" exclaimed Molly "do you consider marriage unbecoming, then, madame?"

"With consent and approval of parents, and a due regard for every consideration,—no."

"But it is just then that it is most tiresome!" the young lady asserted, rousing even Alice from her indifference.

"But, Molly!" she said, reproachfully.

"Baroness Ernsthauseu is jesting, of course," said Frau von Lasberg, with an annihilating glance. "But even in jest such talk is extremely reprehensible. A young lady cannot be too guarded in her expressions and conduct. Society is, unfortunately, too ready to gossip."

Her words had, perhaps, some concealed significance,

for Molly's lips quivered as if longing to laugh, but she replied with the most innocent air in the world,—

"You are perfectly right, madame. Just think, last summer everybody at Heilborn was gossiping about the frequent visits of Superintendent Elmhorst. He came almost every week——"

"To see the Herr President," the old lady interposed. "Herr Elmhorst had made the plans and drawings for the new villa in the mountains and was himself superintending its construction; frequent consultations were unavoidable."

"Yes, everybody knew that, but still they gossiped. They talked about Herr Elmhorst's baskets of flowers and other attentions, and they said——"

"I must really beg you, Baroness, to spare us further details," Frau von Lasberg interposed, rising in indignant majesty. The inconsiderate young lady would probably have received a much longer reprimand had not a servant announced that the carriage was waiting. Frau von Lasberg turned to Alice: "I must go to the meeting of the Ladies' Union, my child, and of course you cannot drive out in this rough weather. Moreover, you seem to be rather out of sorts; I fear——"

A very significant glance completed her sentence, and testified to her earnest desire for the visitor's speedy departure, but quite in vain.

"I will stay with Alice and amuse her," Molly declared, with amiable readiness. "You can go without any anxiety, madame."

Madame compressed her lips in mild despair, but she knew from experience that there was no getting rid of this *enfant terrible* if she had taken it into her head to stay; therefore she kissed Alice's forehead, inclined her head to her young friend, and made a dignified exit.

Scarcely had the door closed after her when Molly danced about like an india-rubber ball with, "Thank God, she has gone, high and mighty old duenna that she is! I have something to tell you, Alice, something immensely important,—that is, I wanted to confide it to Erna, but, unfortunately, she is not here, and so you must help me,—you must! or you will blast forever the happiness of two human beings!"

"Who? I?" asked Alice, who at such a tremendous appeal could not but open her eyes.

"Yes, you; but you know nothing yet. I must explain everything to you, and there goes twelve o'clock, and Albert will be here in a moment,—Herr Gersdorf, I mean. The fact is, he loves me, and I love him, and of course we want to marry each other, but my father and mother will not consent because he is not noble. Good heavens, Alice, do not look so surprised! I learned to know him in your house, and it was in your conservatory that he proposed to me a week ago, when that famous violinist was playing in the music-room and all the other people were listening."

"But——" Alice tried to interpose, but without avail; the little Baroness went on, pouring out the story of her love and her woes.

"Do not interrupt me; I have told you nothing yet. When we went home that evening I told my father and mother that I was betrothed, and that Albert was coming the next day to ask their consent. Oh, what a row there was! Papa was indignant, mamma was outraged, and my granduncle fairly snorted with rage. He is a hugely-important person, my granduncle, because he is so very rich, and we shall have his money. But he must die first, and he has no idea of dying, which is very bad for us, papa says, for we have noth-

ing; papa never makes out with his salary, and my granduncle, while he lives, never will give us a penny. There, now you understand!"

"No, I do not understand at all," said Alice, fairly stupefied by this overwhelming stream of confidence. "What has your granduncle to do with it?"

Molly wrung her hands in despair at this lack of comprehension: "Alice, I entreat you not to be so stupid! I tell you they actually passed sentence upon me. Mamma said she was threatened with spasms at the mere thought of my ever being called Frau Gersdorf; papa insisted that I must not throw myself away, because at some future time I should be a great match, at which my granduncle made a wry face, not much edified by this reference to the heirship, and then he went on to make a greater row than any one else about the *mésalliance*. He enumerated all our ancestors, who would one and all turn in their graves. What do I care for that? let the old fellows turn as much as they like; it will be a change for them in their tiresome old ancestral vault. Unfortunately, I took the liberty of saying so, and then the storm burst upon me from all three sides at once. My granduncle raised his hand and made a vow, and then I made one too. I stood up before him, so,"—she stamped her foot on the carpet,—“and vowed that never, never would I forsake my Albert!"

The little Baroness was forced to stop for a moment to take breath, and she availed herself of this involuntary pause to run to the window, whence came the sound of a carriage rolling away; then flying back again, she exclaimed, "She has gone,—the duenna. Thank God, we are rid of her! She suspects something; I knew it by the remarks with which she

favoured me this morning! But she has gone for the present; her meeting will last for at least two hours. I reckoned upon that when I laid my plans. You must know, Alice, that I have been strictly forbidden either to speak or to write to Albert; of course I wrote to him immediately, and I must speak with him besides. So I made an appointment with him here in your drawing-room, and you must be the guardian angel of our love."

Alice did not appear greatly charmed by the part thus assigned her. She had listened to the entire story in a way which positively outraged the eager Molly, without any 'ah's' or 'oh's,' and in mute astonishment that such things could be. A betrothal without, and even against, the consent of parents was something quite outside of the young lady's power of comprehension. Frau von Lasberg's training did not admit of such ideas. So she sat upright, and said, with a degree of decision, "No, that would not be proper."

"What would not be proper? your being a guardian angel?" Molly exclaimed, indignantly. "Are you going to betray my confidence? Do you wish to drive us to despair and death? For we shall die, both of us, if we are parted. Can you answer it to your conscience?"

Fortunately, there was no time to settle this question of conscience, for Herr Gersdorf was announced, and there was a distressing moment of hesitation. Alice really seemed inclined to declare that she was ill and could not receive the visitor, but Molly, in dread of some such disaster, advanced and said aloud and quite dictatorially, "Show Herr Gersdorf in."

The servant vanished, and with a sigh Alice sank back again in her arm-chair. She had done her best, and had tried to resist, but since the words were thus

taken out of her mouth she was not called upon for further effort, but must let the affair take its course.

Herr Gersdorf entered, and Molly flew to meet him, ready to be clasped in his arms, instead of which he kissed her hand respectfully, and, still retaining it in his clasp, approached the young mistress of the house.

"First of all, Fräulein Nordheim, I must ask your forgiveness for the extraordinary demands which my betrothed has made upon your friendship. You probably know that, after her consent to be my wife, I wished immediately to procure that of her parents, but Baron Ernsthausen has refused to see me."

"And he locked *me* up," Molly interpolated, "for the entire forenoon."

"I then wrote to the Baron," Gersdorf continued, "and made my proposal in due form, but received in return a cold refusal without any statement of his reasons therefor. Baron Ernsthausen wrote me——"

"A perfectly odious letter," Molly again interposed, "but my granduncle dictated it. I know he did, for I listened at the keyhole!"

"At all events it was a refusal; but, since Molly has freely accorded me her heart and hand, I shall assuredly assert my rights, and therefore I believed myself justified in availing myself of this opportunity of seeing my betrothed, although without the knowledge of her parents. Once more I entreat your forgiveness, Fräulein Nordheim. Be sure that we shall not abuse your kindness."

It all sounded so frank, so cordial and manly, that Alice began to find the matter far more natural, and in a few words signified her acquiescence. She could not indeed comprehend how this grave, reserved man, who seemed absorbed in the duties of his profession,

had fallen in love with Molly, who was like nothing but quicksilver, nor that his love was returned, but there was no longer any doubt of the fact.

"You need not listen, Alice," Molly said, consolingly. "Take a book and read, or if you really do not feel quite well, lay your head back and go to sleep. We shall not mind it in the least, only do not let us be interrupted."

With which she led the way to the recess of a window half shut off from the room by Turkish curtains looped aside. Here the conversation of the lovers was at first carried on in whispers, but the vivacious little Baroness soon manifested her eagerness by louder tones, so that at last Alice could not choose but hear. She had taken up a book, but it dropped in her lap as the terrible word 'elopement' fell on her ear.

"There is no other way," Molly said, as dictatorially as when she had ordered the servant to admit her lover. "You must carry me off, and it must be the day after to-morrow at half-past twelve. My granduncle leaves for his castle at that time, and my father and mother go with him to the railway-station; they always make so much of him. Meanwhile, we can slip off conveniently. We'll travel as far as Gretna Green, wherever that is,—I have read that there are no tiresome preliminaries to be gone through with there,—and we can return as man and wife. Then all my dead ancestors may stand on their heads, and so may my granduncle, for that matter, if I may only belong to you."

This entire scheme was advanced in a tone of assured conviction, but it did not meet with the expected approval; Gersdorf said, gravely and decidedly,—

"No, Molly, that will not do."

"Not? Why not?"

"Because there are laws and injunctions which expressly forbid such romantic excursions. Your fanciful little brain has no conception as yet of life and its duties; but I know them, and it would ill become me, whose vocation it is to defend the law, to trample it underfoot."

"What do I care for laws and injunctions?" said Molly, deeply offended by this cool rejection of her romantic scheme. "How can you talk of such prosaic things when our love is at stake? What are we to do if papa and mamma persist in saying no?"

"First of all we must wait until your granduncle has really gone home. There is nothing to be done with that stiff old aristocrat; in his eyes I, as a man without a title, am perfectly unfitted to woo a Baroness Ernsthausen. As soon as his influence is no longer present in your household I shall surely have an interview with your father, and shall try to overcome his prejudice; it will be no easy task, but we must have patience and wait."

The little Baroness was thunderstruck at this declaration, this utter ruin of all her air-built castles. Instead of the romantic flight and secret marriage of which she had dreamed, here was her lover counselling patience and prudence; instead of bearing her off in his arms, he talked as if he were ready to institute legal proceedings for her possession. It was altogether too much, and she burst out angrily, "You had better declare at once that you do not care for me, after all; that you have not the courage to win me. You talked very differently before we were betrothed. But I give you back your troth; I will part from you forever; I——" Here she began to sob. "I will marry some

man with no end of ancestors whom my granduncle approves of, but I shall die of grief, and before the year is out I shall be in my grave."

"Molly!"

"Let go my hand!" But he held it fast.

"Molly, look at me! Do you seriously doubt my love?"

This was the tender tone which Molly remembered only too well,—the tone in which the words had been spoken that evening in the fragrant, dim conservatory, to which she had listened with a throbbing heart and glowing cheeks. She stopped sobbing and looked up through her tears at her lover as he bent above her.

"Darling Molly, have you no confidence in me? You have given yourself to me, and I shall keep you for my own in spite of all opposition. Be sure I shall not let my happiness be snatched from me, although some time may pass before I can carry home my little wife."

It sounded so fervent, so faithful, that Molly's tears ceased to flow; her head leaned gently on her lover's shoulder, and a smile played about her lips, as she asked, half archly, half distrustfully, "But, Albert, we surely shall not have to wait until you are as old as my granduncle?"

"No, not nearly so long, my darling," Albert replied, kissing away a tear from the long lashes. "for then, wayward child that you are, ready to fly off if I do not obey your will on the instant, you would have nothing to say to me."

"Oh, yes, I should, however old you were!" exclaimed Molly. "I love you so dearly, Albert!"

Again the voices sank to whispers, and the close of the conversation was inaudible. In about five minutes

the lovers advanced again into the drawing-room, just in time to meet the Herr Superintendent Elmhorst, who, as the guest of the house, entered unannounced.

Wolfgang had gained much in personal appearance during the last three years; his features had grown more decided and manly, his bearing was prouder and more resolute. The young man who when we saw him last had but just placed his foot on the first round of the ladder, which he was determined to ascend, had now learned to mount and to command, but in spite of the consciousness of power, which was revealed in his entire air, there was nothing the least offensive in his demeanour; he seemed to be one whose superiority of nature had involuntarily asserted itself.

He had brought with him a bunch of lovely flowers, which he presented with a few courteous words to the young mistress of the house. There was no need of an introduction to Gersdorf, who had often seen him, and Molly had made his acquaintance at Heilborn, where she had passed the preceding summer. There was some general conversation, but Gersdorf took his leave shortly, and ten minutes afterwards Molly too departed. She would have been glad to stay, to pour out her heart to Alice, but this Herr Elmhorst did not seem at all inclined to go; indeed, in spite of all his courtesy the little Baroness could not help feeling that he considered her presence here superfluous; she took her leave, but said to herself as she passed down the staircase, "There's something going on there."

She was perhaps right, but the 'something' did not make very rapid progress. Alice smelled at her bouquet of camellias and violets, but looked very listless the while. The wealthy heiress, who had always been the object of devoted attention on all sides, had been loaded

with flowers, and took no special pleasure in them. Wolfgang sat opposite her and entertained her after his usual interesting fashion; he talked of the new villa which Nordheim had had built in the mountains and which the family were to occupy for the first time the coming summer.

"The interior arrangements will all be complete before you arrive," he said. "The house itself was finished in the autumn, and the vicinity of the line of railway made it possible for me to superintend everything personally. You will soon feel at home among the mountains, Fräulein Nordheim."

"I know them already," said Alice, still trifling with her flowers. "We go to Heilborn regularly every summer."

"Merely a summer promenade, with the mountains for a background," Elmhurst said. "Those are not the mountains which you will learn to know in your new home; the situation is magnificent, and I flatter myself that you will be pleased with the home itself. It is indeed only a simple mountain-villa, but as such I was expressly ordered to construct it."

"Papa says it is a little masterpiece of architecture," Alice remarked, quietly.

Wolfgang smiled and, as if accidentally, moved his chair a little nearer: "I should be very glad to acquit myself well as an architect. It is not exactly my *métier*, but *you* were to occupy the villa, Fräulein Alice, and I could not leave it to other hands. I obtained permission from the president to build the little mountain-home, which he tells me he intends shall be your special property."

The significance of his words was sufficiently plain, as was also his intimation of her father's approval, but

the young lady neither blushed nor seemed confused; she merely said, with her usual indifferent lassitude,—

“Yes, papa means the villa shall be a present to me; therefore he did not wish me to see it until it was entirely finished. It was very kind of you, Herr Elmhorst, to undertake its construction.”

“Pray do not praise me,” Wolfgang hastily interposed. “On the contrary, it was rank selfishness that caused me to thrust myself forward in the matter. Every architect asks to be paid, and the recompense for which I sue may well seem to you presumptuous. Nevertheless may I speak—may I ask of you what it has long been in my heart to entreat?”

Alice slowly raised her large brown eyes to his with an inquiring expression that was almost melancholy and that seemed fain to read the truth in the young man’s resolute face. She read there eager expectation, but nothing more, and the questioning eyes were again veiled beneath their long lashes. She made no reply.

Wolfgang seemed to consider her silence as an encouragement; he arose and approached her chair, as he went on: “My request is a bold one, I know it, but ‘Fortune favours the bold.’ So I told the Herr President when I first besought of him the honour of an introduction to you. It has always been my motto, and I cling to it to-day. Will you listen to me, Alice?”

She slightly inclined her head, and made no resistance when he took her hand and carried it to his lips. He went on, making a formal proposal for her hand in well-chosen, courteous terms, his melodious voice adding greatly to the eloquence of his words. All that was lacking was ardour; this was a suit for her hand, not a declaration of love.

Alice listened mutely in no surprise; it had long been

an open secret to her that Elmhurst was her suitor, and she knew, too, that her father, discouraging as he had shown himself hitherto to the advances of other men, favoured Elmhurst's suit. He permitted the young man a freedom of intercourse in his house accorded to no other, and he had frequently expressly declared in his daughter's presence that Wolfgang Elmhurst had a brilliant career before him, worth in his eyes incalculably more than the scutcheons of men of rank, who were fain to rehabilitate the faded splendour of their names with a wife's money. Alice herself was too docile to have any will in the matter; it had been impressed upon her from earliest childhood that a well-bred young lady should marry in accordance with her parents' wishes, and she might have found nothing wanting in this extremely correct proposal had not Molly hit upon the idea of making her the guardian angel of a love-affair.

That scene in the window-recess had been so very different; those whispered tones, caressing, cajoling the wayward girl, whose whole heart seemed, nevertheless, devoted to the grave man so much her senior! With what tenderness he had treated her! This suitor respectfully requested the hand of the wealthy heiress, —her hand: there had been no mention whatever made of her heart.

Wolfgang finished and waited for a reply, then stooped and, looking in her face, said, reproachfully, "Alice, have you nothing to say to me?"

Alice saw clearly that something must be said, but she was unaccustomed to decide for herself, and she made answer, as was befitting a pupil of Frau von Lasberg's,—

"I must first speak with papa; his wishes——"

"I have just left him," Elmhorst interposed, "and I come with his permission and entire approval. May I tell him that my suit has found favour in your eyes? May I present my betrothed to him?"

Alice looked up with the same anxious inquiry in her eyes as before, and replied, softly, "You must have great consideration for me. I have been so ill and wretched all through my childhood that I am still oppressed with a sense of my weakness. You will suffer from it, and I am afraid——"

She broke off, but there was a childlike pathos in her tone, in the entreaty for forbearance from the young heiress, who, with her hand, bestowed a princely fortune. Wolfgang, perhaps, felt this, for for the first time there was something like ardour in his manner as he declared,—

"Do not speak thus, Alice! I know that yours is a delicate temperament needing to be guarded and protected, and I will shield you from every rude contact in life. Trust me, confide your future to me, and I promise you by my——" "love" he was going to say, but his lips refused to utter the falsehood. The man was proud, he might coolly calculate, but he could not feign, and he completed his sentence more slowly,—
"by my honour you never shall repent it!"

The words sounded resolute and manly, and he was in earnest. Alice felt this; she laid her hand willingly in his, and submitted to be clasped in his arms. Her suitor's lips touched her own, he expressed his gratitude, his joy, called her his beloved; in short, they were duly betrothed. A trifle only was lacking,—the exultant confession made just before by little Molly amid tears and laughter, 'I love you so dearly, so very dearly!'

CHAPTER VI.

AT PRESIDENT NORDHEIM'S.

THE reception-rooms of the Nordheim mansion were brilliantly lighted for the celebration not only of the birthday of the daughter of the house, but also of her betrothal. It was a surprising piece of news for society, which, in spite of all reports and gossip, had never seriously believed in the possibility of an alliance so unheard-of. It was incredible that a man, notoriously one of the wealthiest in the country, should bestow his only child upon a young engineer without rank, of unpretending origin, and possessing nothing save distinguished ability, which, to be sure, was warrant for his future.

That it was scarcely an affair of the heart every one knew; Alice had the reputation of great coldness of nature; she was probably incapable of very deep sentiment. Nevertheless she was a most enviable prize, and the announcement of her betrothal caused many a bitter disappointment in aristocratic circles where the heiress had been coveted. This Nordheim, it was clear, did not understand how to prize the privileges which his wealth bestowed upon him. With it he might have purchased a coronet for his daughter, instead of which he had chosen a son-in-law from among the officials of his railway. There was much indignation expressed, nevertheless every one who was invited came to this entertainment. People were curious to see the lucky man who had distanced all titled competitors, and whom fate had so suddenly

placed on life's pinnacle, in that he had been chosen as the future lord of millions.

It was just before the beginning of the entertainment when the president with Elmhorst entered the first of the large reception-rooms. He was apparently in the best of humours and upon excellent terms with his future son-in-law.

"You have your first introduction to the society of the capital this evening, Wolfgang," said he. "In your brief visits you have seen only our family. It is time for you to establish relations here, since it will be your future place of residence. Alice is accustomed to the society life of a great city, and you can have no objection to it."

"Of course not, sir," Wolfgang replied. "I like to be at the centre of life and activity, but hitherto it has been incompatible with the duties of my profession. That it will not be so in the future I see from your example. You conduct from here all your various undertakings."

"This activity, however, is beginning to oppress me," said Nordheim. "I have latterly felt the need of a support, and I depend upon your partially relieving me. For the present you are indispensable in the completion of the railway line; the engineer-in-chief, in his present state of feeble health, is the head of the work only in name."

"Yes, it is in fact entirely in my hands, and if he retires,—I know he is thinking seriously of doing so,—I have your promise, sir, that I shall succeed him?"

"Assuredly, and this time I am not afraid of meeting with any opposition. It is, to be sure, the first time that so young a man has been placed at the head of such an undertaking, but you have shown your

ability in the Wolkenstein bridge, and the position can scarcely be refused to my future son-in-law."

"In admitting me to your family, Herr Nordheim, you give me much,—I know it," said Elmhorst, gravely; "in return I can give you only a son."

The president's eyes rested thoughtfully upon the face of the speaker, and with an access of warmth extremely rare in the man of business, he replied, "I had an only son, in whom all my hopes were centred; he died in early childhood, and I have often reflected bitterly that some spendthrift idler would probably scatter abroad what I had taken such pains to accumulate. I think better of you; you will continue and preserve what I have begun, complete what I leave unfinished. I am glad to make you my intellectual as well as my material heir."

"I will not disappoint you," Wolfgang said, pressing the hand extended to him.

Here were two kindred natures, but surely the conversation was a strange one for the evening of a betrothal and while awaiting a promised bride. Both men had spoken of their schemes and undertakings; Alice had not been mentioned. The father had demanded of his future son-in-law much, but there had been no allusion to his daughter's happiness; and the lover, who seemed entirely sensible of the advantages of the family connection in prospect, never mentioned the name of his betrothed. They talked of construction and bridges, of the engineer-in-chief and the railway company, as coolly and in as business-like a fashion as if the matter in question were a partnership to be formed between them; and in fact it was nothing else,—either could easily have foregone the additional relationship. They were interrupted, however: a servant

entered to ask for orders from the president with relation to the arrangement of the table, and Nordheim thought best to betake himself to the dining-hall to decide the matter. It was still too early for the arrival of the guests, and the ladies of the house had not yet made their appearance. The servants were all at their posts, and for the moment Wolfgang was left alone in the reception-rooms, which occupied the entire upper story of the mansion.

From the large apartment where he was, with its rich crimson rugs and velvet hangings, and its profusion of gilding, he could look through the entire suite of rooms, the splendour of which was most striking in their present deserted, empty condition. Everywhere there was a lavish wealth of costly objects, everywhere pictures, statues, and other works of art, each one worth a small fortune, and the long suite ended, as in some fairy realm, in a dimly-lit conservatory filled with exotic plants of rare magnificence. In an hour these brilliant, fragrant apartments would be crowded with the most distinguished society of the capital, all ready to accept the hospitality of the railway king.

Wolfgang stood still and looked slowly about him. It was indeed a bewildering sensation, that of knowing himself a son of this house, the future heir of all this magnificence. No one could blame the young man if at the thought he stood proudly erect, while his eyes gleamed exultantly. He had kept the vow made to himself,—he had executed the bold scheme which he had once confided to his friend,—he had dared the flight and had reached the summit. At an age when others are beginning to shape their future he had clutched success in a firm grasp. He was now stand-

ing upon the height of which he had dreamed, and the world lay fair indeed at his feet.

The drawing-room door opened; Elmhurst turned and advanced a few steps towards it, then paused suddenly, for instead of his expected betrothed Erna von Thurgau entered. She was much changed since she had been met by the strayed young superintendent among the cliffs of the Wolkenstein. The wayward child who had grown up free and untrammelled among her mountains had not without result passed three years in her uncle's luxurious home, under the training of Frau von Lasberg. The little Alpine rose had been transformed to a young lady, who with perfect grace but also with entire formality returned Wolfgang's salutation. This was a beautiful woman, a gloriously beautiful woman.

Her childish features had become perfectly regular, and although the rich bloom of health still coloured her cheek, her face expressed a degree of cool gravity unknown to the joyous daughter of the Freiherr von Thurgau. Her eyes no longer laughed as of old; there lay hidden in their depths a mystery akin to that of the mountain-lakes of her home, whose colour they had borrowed,—a mystery as powerfully attractive as that of the lakes themselves. She looked singularly lovely as she stood in the full light of the chandelier, dressed in pure mist-like white, her only ornaments single water-lilies scattered here and there among its whiteness. Her hair no longer fell in masses about her shoulders, but fashion permitted its full luxuriance to be appreciated, and pale lily-buds gleamed amid its waves.

"Alice and Frau von Lasberg will be here presently," she said, as she entered. "I thought my uncle was here."

"He has gone for a moment to the dining-hall," Elmhorst replied, after a salutation quite as formal as her own.

For an instant Erna seemed about to follow her uncle, but, apparently recollecting that this might be discourteous towards a future relative, she paused and let her gaze wander through the long suite of rooms.

"I think you see these rooms fully lighted to-night for the first time, Herr Elmhorst? They are very fine, are they not?"

"Very fine; and upon one coming, as I do, from the winter solitude of the mountains, they produce a dazzling impression."

"They dazzled me too when I first came here," the young lady said, indifferently; "but one easily becomes accustomed to such surroundings, as you will find by experience when you take up your residence here. It is settled that you are to be married in a year, is it not?"

"It is,—next spring."

"Rather a long time to wait. Have you really consented to such a period of probation?"

The lover seemed, oddly enough, to be rather averse to this allusion to his marriage. He examined with apparent interest a huge porcelain vase which stood near him, and replied, evidently desirous of changing the subject, "I cannot but consent, since for the present I am master neither of my time nor of my movements. The first thing to be attended to is the completion of the railway, of the construction of which I am superintendent."

"Are you, then, so fettered?" Erna asked, with gentle irony. "I should have thought you would find it easy to liberate yourself?"

"Liberate myself,—from what?"

"From a profession which you must certainly resign in the future."

"Do you consider that as a matter of course, Fräulein von Thurgau?" Wolfgang asked, nettled by her tone. "I cannot see what should induce such a course on my part."

"Why, your future position as the husband of Alice Nordheim."

The young engineer flushed crimson; he glanced angrily at the girl who ventured to remind him that he was marrying money. She was smiling, and her remark sounded like a jest, but her eyes spoke a different language, the language of contempt, which he understood but too well. He was not a man, however, to rest quietly under the scorn which pursues a fortune-hunter; he too smiled, and rejoined, with cool courtesy, "Pardon me, Fräulein von Thurgau, you are mistaken. My profession, my work, are necessities of existence for me. I was not made for an idle, inactive enjoyment of life. This seems incomprehensible to you——"

"Not at all," Erna interposed. "I perfectly understand how a true man must depend solely upon his own exertions."

Wolfgang bit his lip, but he parried this thrust too: "That I may accept as a compliment, for I certainly depended entirely upon my own exertions when I planned the Wolkenstein bridge, and I trust my work will bring me credit, even as 'the husband of Alice Nordheim.' But excuse me; these are matters which cannot interest a lady."

"They interest me," Erna said, bluntly. "My home was destroyed by the Wolkenstein bridge, and your

work demanded yet another and far dearer sacrifice of me."

"Which you never can forgive me, I know," Wolfgang went on. "You reproach me for an unhappy accident, although your sense of justice must tell you that I am not to blame, that I do not deserve it."

"I do not blame you, Herr Elmhorst."

"You did in that most wretched hour, and you do it still."

Erna did not reply, but her silence was eloquent enough. Elmhorst appeared to have expected a denial, if only a formal one, for there was an added bitterness in his tone as he continued: "I regret infinitely that I should have been the one chosen to conduct the last business arrangements with Baron Thurgau. They had to be made, and their tragic conclusion lay beyond human foresight. It was not I, Fräulein Thurgau, but iron necessity that required of you the sacrifice of your home; the Wolkenstein bridge is not less guilty than I am."

"I know it," Erna observed, coldly; "but there are cases in which one finds it impossible to be just,—you should see that, Herr Elmhorst. You are now a member of our family, and may rest assured that I shall show you all the consideration due to a relative; for my feelings I cannot be called to account."

Wolfgang looked her full and darkly in the face: "In other words, you detest my work and—myself?"

Erna was silent; she had long outgrown the childish waywardness that had once prompted her to tell the stranger to his face that she could not endure him or his sneers at her mountain-legends. The young lady never dreamed of conduct so unbecoming, and she confronted him now in entire self-possession. But her eyes

had not forgotten their language, and at this moment they declared that the girlish nature was quelled only in appearance,—it still slumbered untamed in the depths of her soul. There was a lightning-flash in them which uttered a quick, vehement 'yes' in answer to Wolfgang's last question, although the lips were mute.

It was impossible for Elmhorst to misunderstand it, and yet he gazed into the blue depths of those hostile eyes as if they had the power to hold him spell-bound; only for a few seconds, however, for Erna turned away, saying, lightly, "We certainly are having a very odd conversation, talking of sacrifice, blame, and hatred, and all on the day of your betrothal."

"You are right, Fräulein Thurgau; let us talk of something else," Wolfgang rejoined.

But they did not talk of anything else; on the contrary, an oppressive silence ensued. Erna seated herself and became apparently absorbed in an examination of the pictures on her fan, while her companion walked to the door of the next room as if to admire its magnificence. His face, however, no longer showed the proud satisfaction which had informed it a quarter of an hour before: he looked irritated and ill at ease.

Again the drawing-room door opened and Alice and Frau von Lasberg entered, the latter with a certain air of resignation; a darling wish of hers was to be frustrated to-night. She had looked forward to seeing Alice, whom she had trained entirely according to her own ideas, enrolled in the ranks of the aristocracy, and one of the young girl's distinguished suitors, the scion of an ancient noble line, had enjoyed the Baroness's special favour, and now Wolfgang Elmhorst was carrying off the prize! He was indeed the only man without a title whom Frau von Lasberg could have forgiven

for so doing,—he had long since succeeded in winning her regard,—but it was nevertheless a painful fact that a man so perfectly well-bred, so agreeable to the strict old lady, possessed not the ghost of a title.

Alice, in a pale-blue satin gown rather overtrimmed with costly lace, and with a long train, did not look particularly well. The heavy folds of the rich material seemed to weigh down her delicate figure, and the diamonds sparkling on her neck and arms—her father's birthday gift to her—did not avail to relieve her want of colour. Such a frame did not suit her; an airy flower-trimmed ball-dress would have been much more becoming.

Wolfgang hastened to meet his betrothed, and carried her hand to his lips. He was full of tender consideration for her, and he was courtesy itself to the Baroness Lasberg, but the cloud did not vanish from his brow until the president returned and the guests began to arrive. Gradually the rooms were filled with a brilliant assemblage. Those present were indeed the foremost in the capital, the aristocracy by birth and by talent, those distinguished both in the world of finance and in the domain of art, the best names in military and diplomatic circles. Splendid uniforms alternated with costly toilets, and the throng glittered and rustled as only such an assemblage can,—an assemblage thoroughly in keeping with the magnificence of the Nordheim establishment.

The centre of attraction was found in the betrothed pair, or rather in the lover, who, an entire stranger to most of those present, was doubly an object of interest. He certainly was an extremely handsome man, this Wolfgang Elmhorst, no one could deny that, and there was no doubt of his capacity and his talent,

but these gifts alone hardly entitled him to the hand of a wealthy heiress, who might well look for something more. And then, too, the young man appeared to take his good fortune, which would have fairly intoxicated any one else, quite as a matter of course. Not the slightest embarrassment betrayed that this was the first time he had been thus surrounded. With his betrothed's hand resting on his arm he stood proudly calm beside his future father-in-law, was presented to every one, received and acknowledged with easy grace all congratulations, and played admirably the principal part thus assigned him. He was entirely the son of the house, accepting his position as such as a foregone conclusion, and even at times seeming to dominate the entire assembly.

Among the guests was the Court-Councillor von Ernsthausen, a stiff, formal bureaucrat, who in the absence of his wife had his daughter on his arm. The little Baroness was charming in her pink tulle ball-dress, with a wreath of snow-drops on her black curls, and she was beaming with delight and exultation in having, after a hard combat, succeeded in being present at the entertainment. Her parents had at first refused to allow her to come, because Herr Gersdorf was also invited, and they dreaded the renewal of his attentions. The Herr Papa was armed to the teeth against attack from the hostile force; he kept guard like a sentinel over his daughter, and seemed resolved that she should not leave his side during the entire evening.

But the lover showed no inclination to expose himself to the danger of another repulse; he contented himself with a courteous salutation from a distance, which Baron Ernsthausen returned very stiffly. Molly inclined her head gravely and decorously, as if quite

agreed with her paternal escort; of course she had devised the plan of her campaign, and she proceeded to carry it out with an energy that left nothing to be desired.

She embraced and congratulated Alice, which necessitated her leaving her father's arm; then she greeted Frau von Lasberg with the greatest amiability in return for a very cool recognition on that lady's part, and finally she overwhelmed Erna with demonstrations of affection, drawing her aside to the recess of a window. The councillor looked after her with a discontented air, but, as Gersdorf remained quietly at the other end of the room, he was reassured, and apparently conceived that his office of guardian was perfectly discharged by keeping the enemy constantly in sight. He never suspected the cunning schemes that were being contrived and carried out behind his back.

The whispered interview in the window-recess did not last long, and at its close Fräulein von Thurgau vanished from the room, while Molly returned to her father and entered into conversation with various friends. She managed, however, to perceive that Erna returned after a few minutes, and, approaching Herr Gersdorf, addressed him. He looked rather surprised, but bowed in assent, and the little Baroness triumphantly unfurled her fan. The action had begun, and the guardian was checkmated for the rest of the evening.

Meanwhile, the president had missed his niece and was looking about for her rather impatiently, while talking with a gentleman who had just arrived, and who was not one of the *habitués* of the house. He was undoubtedly a person of distinction, for Nordheim treated him with a consideration which he accorded to

but few individuals. Erna no sooner made her appearance again than her uncle approached her and presented the stranger.

"Herr Ernst Waltenberg, of whom you have heard me speak."

"I was so unfortunate as to miss the ladies when I called yesterday, and so am an entire stranger to Fräulein von Thurgau," said Waltenberg.

"Not quite: I talked much of you at dinner," Nordheim interposed. "A cosmopolitan like yourself, who after the tour of the world comes to us directly from Persia, cannot fail to interest, and I am sure you will find an eager listener to your experiences of travel in my niece. Her taste is decidedly for the strange and unusual."

"Indeed, Fräulein von Thurgau?" asked Waltenberg, gazing in evident admiration at Erna's lovely face.

Nordheim perceived this and smiled, while, without giving his niece a chance to reply, he continued:

"You may rely upon it. But we must first of all try to make you more at home in Europe, where you are positively a stranger. I shall be glad if my house can in any wise contribute to your pleasure; I pray you to believe that you will always be welcome here."

He shook his guest's hand with great cordiality and retired. There was a degree of intention in the way in which he had brought the pair together and then left them to themselves, but Erna did not perceive it. She had been in no wise interested in the presentation of the new-comer,—strangers from beyond the seas were no rarity in her uncle's house,—but her first glance at the guest's unusual type of countenance aroused her attention.

Ernst Waltenberg was no longer young,—he had

passed forty, and although not very tall his frame was muscular and well-knit, showing traces, however, of a life of exposure and exertion. His face, tanned dark brown by his sojourn for years in tropical countries, was not handsome, but full of expression and of those lines graven not by years, but by experience of life. His broad brow was crowned by close black curls, and his steel-gray eyes beneath their black brows could evidently flash on occasion. There was something strangely foreign about him that set him quite apart from the brilliant but mostly uninteresting personages that crowded Nordheim's rooms. His voice too had a peculiar intonation,—it was deep, but sounded slightly foreign, possibly from years of speaking other tongues than his own. Evidently he was perfectly versed in the forms of society; the manner in which he took his seat beside Fräulein von Thurgau was entirely that of a man of the world.

"You have but lately come from Persia?" Erna asked, referring to what her uncle had said.

"Yes, I was there last; for ten years I have not seen Europe before."

"And yet you are a German? Probably your profession kept you away thus long?"

"My profession?" Waltenberg repeated, with a fleeting smile. "No; I merely yielded to my inclination. I am not of those steadfast natures which become rooted in house and home. I was always longing to be out in the world, and I gratified my desire absolutely in this respect."

"And in all these ten years have you never been homesick?"

"To tell the truth, no! One gradually becomes weaned from one's home, and at last feels like a stranger

here. I am here now only to arrange various business affairs and personal matters, and do not propose to stay long. I have no family to keep me here; I am quite alone."

"But your country should have a claim upon you," Erna interposed.

"Perhaps so; but I am modest enough to imagine that it does not need me. There are so many better men than I here."

"And do *you* not need your country?"

The remark was rather an odd one from a young lady, and Waltenberg looked surprised, especially when the glance that met his own emphasized the reproach in the girl's words.

"You are indignant at my admission, Fräulein Thurgau, but nevertheless I must plead guilty," he said, gravely. "Believe me, a life such as mine has been for years, free of all fetters, surrounded by a nature lavish in beauty and luxuriance, while our own is meagre enough, has the effect of a magic draught. Those who have once tasted it can never again forego it. Were I really obliged to return to this world of unrealities, this formal existence in what we call society, beneath these gray wintry skies, I think I—— but this is rank heresy in the eyes of one who is an admired centre of this same society."

"And yet she can perhaps understand you," Erna said, with a sudden access of bitterness. "I grew up among the mountains, in the magnificent solitude of the highlands, far from the world and its ways, and it is hard, very hard, to forego the sunny, golden liberty of my childhood!"

"Even here?" Waltenberg asked, with a glance about him at the brilliant rooms, now crowded with guests.

"Most of all here."

The answer was low, scarcely audible, and the look that accompanied it was strangely sad and weary, but the next moment the young girl seemed to repent the half-involuntary confession; she smiled and said, jestingly,—

"You are right, this is heresy, and my uncle would disapprove; he evidently hopes to make you really at home among us. Let me make you acquainted with the gentleman now approaching us; he is one of our celebrities and will surely interest you."

Her intention of breaking off a conversation that had become unusually grave was evident, and Waltenberg bowed silently, but with an expression of annoyance. He was presented to the 'celebrity,' with whom he conversed but for a few moments, however, before seeking out Herr Gersdorf, whom he had long known; they had been college-friends.

"Well, Ernst, are you beginning to be at home among us?" the lawyer asked. "You seemed much interested in your talk with Fräulein Thurgau. A handsome girl, is she not?"

"Yes, and really worth the trouble of talking to," Ernst replied, retiring somewhat from the throng with his friend, who laughed, as he said in an undertone,—

"Extremely complimentary to all the other ladies. I suppose it is not worth the trouble to talk with them?"

"No, it is not," Waltenberg coolly replied, in a still lower tone. "I really cannot bring myself to take part in their vapid talk through an entire evening. It is particularly tiresome around the betrothed couple,—a perfect chorus of utterly senseless remarks. More

over, the lady looks very insignificant, and is very uninteresting."

Gersdorf shrugged his shoulders: "Nevertheless her name is Alice Nordheim, and that was quite enough for her lover. There is many a one here who would gladly stand in his shoes, but he had the wit to gain her father's favour, and so won the prize."

"Marrying for money, then? A fortune-hunter?"

"If you choose to call him so,—yes; but very talented, very energetic,—sure to succeed. He already rules the various officials of his railway as absolutely as his future father-in-law does the directors, and when you see his *chef-d'œuvre*, the Wolkenstein bridge, you will admit that his talent is of no common order."

"No matter for that, I detest fortune-hunting from my very soul. One might forgive it in a poor devil with no other chance to rise in the world, but this Elmhorst seems to have force of character, and yet sells himself and his liberty for money. Contemptible!"

"My dear Ernst, you are evidently just from the wilds," Gersdorf rejoined. "Such things are very usual in our much-lauded 'society,' and among very respectable people. Of course money is no consideration to you, with your hundreds of thousands. Are you never going to cease wandering to and fro on the earth and try sitting beside your own hearth-stone?"

"No, Albert, I never was made for that. Liberty is my bride, and I shall be faithful to her."

"I said the same thing," the lawyer rejoined, with a laugh; "but time brings one experience of this same bride's rather chilly nature, and if in addition one meets with the misfortune of falling in love, liberty loses all attraction and the whilom bachelor is glad

enough to turn into an honest married man. I am just about to undergo this transformation."

"I condole with you."

"No need; it suits me extremely well. But you know all the story of my love and woe; what do you think of the future Frau Gersdorf?"

"I think her so charming that she excuses in a measure your desertion of your colours. She is lovely, with that rosy, laughing little face."

"Yes, my little Molly is an embodiment of sunshine," Albert said, heartily, his glance seeking out the young girl. "The barometer at her home points to 'stormy' at present; but although the court-councillor and his entire family, with the famous granduncle,—who, by the bye, is the worst of all,—should take the field against me, I am resolved to come off victorious."

"Herr Waltenberg, may I request you to escort my niece to supper?" said the president as he passed the young men.

"With pleasure," Waltenberg assented, hurrying away, with such sincere satisfaction expressed in his face, that Gersdorf could not help looking after him with a mocking smile.

"I doubt whether I shall long be the only one of us two to desert his colours," he said to himself as his friend joined Fräulein von Thurgau, looking like anything rather than a misogynist.

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW SCHEME.

THE doors of the supper-room were opened and the assemblage began to enter it by couples. Baron Ernsthausen offered his arm to the Baroness Lasberg, having been assigned her as his neighbour at table, and having learned from her with much satisfaction that Lieutenant von Alven was to be his daughter's escort, and that Herr Gersdorf's place was at the opposite end of the table. The distinguished couple slowly advanced followed by a crowd of others, but, strangely enough, Lieutenant von Alven offered his arm to another young girl, and Herr Gersdorf approached the Baroness Ernsthausen.

"What does this mean, Molly?" he asked, in a low tone. "Am I to take you to supper, as Fräulein von Thurgau tells me? Did you prevail on Frau von Lasberg——?"

"Oh, she is a firm ally of my father and mother," Molly whispered, taking his arm. "Only fancy, she had the entire length of the table between us! Mamma is at home with a headache, but she enjoined it upon papa not to let me out of his sight, and Frau von Lasberg was to be guard number two. But they have no idea with whom they have to deal; I have outwitted them all."

"What is it that you have done?" Gersdorf asked, rather uneasily.

"Changed the table-cards!" Molly declared, exultantly, "or rather persuaded Erna to change them.

She did not want to at first, but when I asked her whether she could answer it to her conscience to plunge us both into fathomless despair, she really could not, and so she consented."

The phrases which the little Baroness used to beguile the guardian angels of her love came trippingly from her tongue; her lover, however, did not seem greatly edified by her stroke of policy; he shook his head, and said, reproachfully, "But, my dear Molly, it cannot possibly be concealed, and when your father sees us——"

"He'll be furious!" Molly completed the sentence very placidly. "But you know, Albert, he always is that, and a little more or a little less really makes no difference. And now do not look so frightfully grave. I believe you would actually like to scold me for my brilliant idea."

"I ought to," said Albert, smiling in spite of himself; "but who could find fault with you, you wayward little sprite?"

In the buzz of conversation the lovers' whispered tones were unheard as they entered the supper-room, where the councillor was already seated beside his companion. The pleasures of the table were dear to his heart, and the prospect of a good supper attuned his soul to benevolence. But suddenly his face grew rigid as if from a sight of the Gorgon, although it was only upon perceiving the extremely happy face of his little daughter as she appeared upon Herr Gersdorf's arm.

"Madame, for heaven's sake, look there!" he whispered. "You told me that Lieutenant von Alven——"

"Was to take Molly to supper; and in accordance with your express wish Herr Gersdorf——"

Frau von Lasberg stopped in the middle of her sentence and also became petrified as she perceived the couple just taking their seats near the other end of the table.

"Beside him!" The councillor darted an annihilating glance down the long table, past thirty seated guests, at the lawyer.

"I cannot understand this; I arranged the places at table myself."

"Perhaps some mistake of the servants——"

"No, it is a plot of the Baroness's," Frau von Lasberg interposed, indignantly. "But pray let us have no scene. When supper is over——"

"I shall take Molly directly home!" Ernsthausen concluded the sentence, opening his napkin with an energy that boded no good to his disobedient daughter.

The supper began and followed its course with all the splendour to be expected from an entertainment in the Nordheim mansion. The tables were almost overloaded with heavy silver and glittering glass, among which bloomed the rarest flowers. There was an endless variety of food, with the finest kinds of wine. The usual toasts to the betrothed couple were offered, the usual speeches made, and over it all brooded the weariness inseparable from such displays of princely wealth.

Nevertheless certain of the younger folk enjoyed themselves excessively; notably Baroness Molly, who, quite unaffected by her approaching doom, laughed and talked with her neighbour at table, while Gersdorf would have been no lover had he not forgotten all else and quaffed full draughts of the unexpected happiness of this interview.

Not less eager, if graver and of more significance,

was the conversation carried on at the upper end of the table between Fräulein von Thurgau, who as the nearest relative of the family had her place opposite the betrothed couple, and Ernst Waltenberg, who was a distinguished guest. Hitherto he had seemed to take but little interest in the assemblage and had been rather silent, but now he made it plain that where it pleased him to charm by his conversation he was fully able to do so.

He did indeed tell of distant lands and peoples, but he described them so vividly that his hearer seemed to see them. As he spoke of the charm of the southern seas, the splendour of the tropical landscape, Erna, listening with sparkling eyes, seemed carried away. Now and then Wolfgang, beside Alice on the opposite side of the table, scanned the pair with an oddly searching glance; his conversation with his betrothed did not seem to be of a particularly lively nature, master of the art though he were.

At last supper was over, and all returned to the reception-rooms. The universal mood seemed less constrained, laughter and talk were louder, and so general was the mingling of various groups that it was difficult to single out any particular individual, as Baron Ernst-hausen found to his vexation, for his young daughter had disappeared for the time.

Ernst Waltenberg had conducted Erna to the conservatory, and was seated beside her, deep in the conversation begun at supper, when the betrothed couple entered. Wolfgang started as he perceived the pair, bowed coldly to Waltenberg, who sprang up to offer his place to Fräulein Nordheim, and said, "Alice complains of weariness and thinks it will be quieter here. We are not intruding?"

"Upon whom?" Erna asked, quietly.

"Upon yourself and Herr Waltenberg. You were in such earnest conversation, and we should be very sorry——"

Instead of replying, Erna took her cousin's hand and drew her down beside her: "You are right, Alice, you need rest. It is a hard task even for those stronger than you to be the centre of such an entertainment."

"I only wanted to withdraw for a few moments," said Alice, who really did look fatigued. "But we seem to have disturbed you; Herr Waltenberg was in the midst of a most interesting description, which he broke off when we entered."

"I was telling of my last visit to India," Waltenberg explained, "and I took the opportunity to make a request of Baroness Thurgau, which I should like to make of you also, Fräulein Nordheim. In the course of my ten years of absence from Europe I have collected a quantity of foreign curiosities. They were all sent home, and form a veritable museum which I am just having arranged by an experienced hand. May I entreat the ladies to honour me with a visit,—with yourself, of course, Herr Elmhorst? I think I can show you much that will interest you."

"I fear my engagements will not allow me to accept your kind invitation," Elmhorst replied, with rather cool courtesy. "I must leave town in a couple of days."

"So shortly after your betrothal?"

"I must. In the present condition of our work I cannot allow myself a longer leave of absence."

"Do you agree to this, Fräulein Nordheim?" Waltenberg appealed to Alice. "I should think under present circumstances you would have the first claim."

"Duty has the first claim upon me, Herr Waltenberg,—in my opinion, at least."

"Must you take it so seriously,—even now?"

Wolfgang's eyes flashed. He understood this 'even now?' and understood also the look which he encountered; he had seen the same expression on another face a few hours ago. He bit his lip; for the second time he was reminded that he was considered in society only as 'Alice Nordheim's future husband,'—one who could with her fortune in prospect purchase immunity from duties which he had undertaken to fulfil.

"To fulfil a duty is with me a point of honour," he replied, coldly.

"Yes, we Germans are fanatics for duty," Waltenberg said, negligently. "I have lost somewhat of this national characteristic in foreign countries. Oh, Fräulein von Thurgau, not that disapproving look, I entreat. My unfortunate frankness will ruin me in your estimation, but remember I come from quite another world, and am absolutely uncivilized according to European ideas."

"You certainly seem so with respect to some of your views," Erna said, lightly, but withal with a shade of severity.

He smiled, and, leaning over the back of her chair, said, in a lower tone, "Yes, I need to be harmonized with mankind, and with our worthy Germans. Perhaps some one will have pity upon me and undertake the task. Do you think it would be worth the trouble?"

"Can you really endure this close, stifling temperature, Alice?" Wolfgang asked, with ill-concealed impatience. "I fear it is worse for you than the heat of the rooms."

"But there is such a crowd of people there. Pray let us stay here, Wolfgang."

He bit his lip, but naturally yielded to a wish of his betrothed's so distinctly expressed.

"The air here is tropical," said Waltenberg.

"It is indeed. Oppressive, and debilitating for any one accustomed to breathe freely."

The words sounded almost rude, but he to whom they were addressed took no heed; he was still gazing at Erna as he went on: "These palms and orchids require it. Look, Fräulein von Thurgau, they enchant the eye even here in captivity. In the tropics, where they climb and twine in liberty, they are wonderful indeed."

"Yes, that world must be beautiful," Erna said, softly, while her eyes wandered dreamily over the foreign splendour of the blossoms gleaming among the green on every side and filling the conservatory with their sweet but enervating fragrance.

"Was your stay in the East a long one, Herr Waltenberg?" Alice asked, in her cool, uninterested way.

"I passed some years there, but I am at home all over the world, and can even boast having penetrated far into Africa."

Wolfgang's attention was roused by these last words: "Probably as a member of some scientific expedition?" he observed.

"No, that would have had no charm for me. I detest nothing so much as constraint, and it is impossible in such expeditions to preserve one's personal freedom. One is bound by the rules of the expedition, by the wishes of one's companions, by all sorts of things, and I am wont to follow my own will only."

"Ah, indeed?" A half-contemptuous smile played

about Wolfgang's lips. "I beg pardon; I really thought you had gone to Africa as a scientific pioneer."

"Good heavens, how in earnest you are about everything, Herr Elmhorst!" Waltenberg said, with a scarcely perceptible sneer. "Must life perforce be labour? I never coveted fame as an explorer; I have enjoyed the freedom and beauty of the world, and have renewed my youth and strength in quaffing long draughts of such enjoyment. To put it to positive use would destroy its romance for me."

Elmhorst shrugged his shoulders, and remarked, with apparent indifference, in which there was nevertheless a spice of insolence, "Certainly a most convenient way of arranging one's existence. And yet hardly to my taste, and quite impossible for most people. So to live one should be born to great wealth."

"No, not of necessity," Waltenberg retorted, in the same tone. "Some lucky chance may endow one with wealth."

Wolfgang looked annoyed, and he was evidently about to make a sharp reply, when Erna, perceiving this, hastened to give the conversation another turn.

"I fear my uncle must resign all hope of making you at home among us," said she. "You are so entirely under the spell of your tropical world, that everything here will seem petty and meagre to you. I hardly think that even our mountains could move you to admiration, but there you will find me a determined antagonist."

Waltenberg turned towards her,—perhaps he saw in her face, or was conscious himself, that he had gone too far. "You do me injustice, Fräulein Thurgau," he replied. "I have never forgotten the Alpine world of

my native country,—its lofty summits, its deep-blue lakes, and the lovely creations of its legends by which it is peopled,—creatures”—his voice sounded veiled—“compounded as it were of air and Alpine snow, with the white fairy-like flowers of its waters crowning their fair hair.”

The compliment was too bold, but the manner in which it was uttered took from it all presumption, as the speaker's eyes rested in admiration upon the beautiful girl before him in her white, misty ball-dress.

“Alice, are you rested?” Wolfgang asked, aloud. “We really ought not to remain away from the other room so long. Let us go back.”

His words sounded almost like a command. Alice arose, put her hand within his arm, and they left the conservatory together.

“Herr Elmhurst seems to have a decided predilection for command,” Waltenberg said, ironically, looking after them. “His tone was decidedly that of the future lord and master, and upon the very day of his betrothal. Fräulein Nordheim's choice seems surprising to me in more than one sense.”

“Alice's is a very gentle, docile nature,” Erna observed.

“So much the worse. Her lover seems to have no conception that it is this connection alone that raises him to a position to which he could not personally lay any claim.”

The young girl had risen and approached a group of plants, whose heavy crimson blossoms hung amid dark green leaves. After a moment's pause she rejoined, “I do not think Wolfgang Elmhurst a man to allow himself to be ‘raised.’”

“Why, then, should her—— Pardon me, I ought

not to say one word in disapproval of your future relative."

Erna did not reply, and he seemed to take her silence as a permission to proceed, for he continued, very gravely: "Do you think inclination plays any part in his suit?"

"No."

The word was uttered with a certain harshness, as the girl's face leaned half hidden among the crimson flowers.

"Nor do I, and my opinion of Herr Elmhorst is based upon that conviction. Pray, Fräulein Thurgau, do not inhale the fragrance of those blossoms so closely; I know the plant,—its odour is delicious but mischievous, and will give you headache. Be careful."

"You are right," she said, with a deep breath, passing her hand across her forehead and standing erect. "It is, besides, time that we returned to the other rooms. May I trouble you, Herr Waltenberg?"

He seemed hardly to agree with this, but nevertheless instantly offered his arm and conducted her to the ball-room, which was still full.

The court-councillor was sitting in a corner nursing his wrath with Frau von Lasberg, who seemed inclined to fan the flame. She had ascertained by questioning the servants that the cards on the table had really been changed, and her indignation was extreme. She harangued the unfortunate father of such a daughter in low but expressive tones, and concluded her discourse with the annihilating declaration, "In short, the conduct of Herr Gersdorf seems to me outrageous!"

"Yes, it is outrageous!" Ernsthausen murmured in a fury. "And, moreover, I have been looking for

Molly for half an hour to take her home, and I cannot find her. She is a terrible child!"

"Under no circumstances should I have allowed her to attend this entertainment," the old lady began again. "When the Frau Baroness opened her heart to me about the affair, I urged it upon her to have recourse to vigorous measures."

"And so we have," Ernsthausen declared; "but it is of no use. My wife is ill with all this worry and vexation, and her indisposition may, probably will, last for days. I am occupied with my official duties. Who is to stand guard over the girl meanwhile and frustrate all her insane schemes?"

"Send Molly to the country to her granduncle," was Frau von Lasberg's advice. "There no personal intercourse with Gersdorf will be possible, and if I know the old Baron he will find a means of preventing any exchange of letters."

The councillor looked as if a ray of light had suddenly invaded the darkness of his soul; he adopted the suggestion with enthusiasm.

"That is an idea!" he cried. "You are right, madame, perfectly right! Molly shall go to my uncle immediately,—the day after to-morrow. He was beside himself at learning of the affair, and will certainly be the best of guardians. I will write to him early to-morrow morning."

He was so possessed with this thought that he hastily arose, and made a fresh attempt to find his daughter, but it was a difficult undertaking. He might as well have given chase to a butterfly, for Molly possessed a wonderful talent for disappearing just as her father was about to confront her. Ernst Waltenberg, who had been taken into council by the lovers twice,

acted as a lightning-conductor on this occasion, in view of the approaching storm, which he diverted by his conversation. Meanwhile, the little Baroness would disappear among a crowd of her friends, to come to light again in an entirely different place. She seemed to regard the company as an assemblage of guardian-angels, to be used according to her good pleasure, and even the minister, her father's illustrious chief, who was present, was obliged to serve her purpose, for she finally took refuge with His Excellency, and complained in the most moving terms that her father was insisting upon driving home, when she wanted to stay so much. The old gentleman instantly espoused the cause of the charming child, and when the councillor appeared with a stern "Molly, the carriage is waiting," he kindly interposed with, "Let it wait, my dear councillor. Youth claims its rights, and I promised the Baroness to intercede for her. You will stay, will you not?"

Ernsthausen was inwardly raging, while his outward man bowed in polite assent, in recognition of which his chief engaged him in conversation, and did not release him until a quarter of an hour had passed. Then, however, the Baron was determined; he invaded the hostile camp, where his daughter was seated in great content between Waltenberg and Gersdorf. The latter approached him with extreme courtesy.

"Herr Councillor, will you kindly appoint an hour when I can call upon you, either to-morrow or the day after?"

Ernsthausen gave him an annihilating glance: "I regret extremely, Herr Gersdorf, that pressing business——"

"Quite right, it is that about which I wish to con-

sult with you," Gersdorf interposed. "The matter concerns the railway company, whose legal representative I am, as you know, and His Excellency the minister has referred me to you. Permit me, however, to visit you at your home instead of at your office, since I have a private matter also to discuss with you."

The Baron was unfortunately in no uncertainty as to what this private matter was, but since he could not refuse to receive the lawyer in his legal capacity, he stood erect with much dignity and answered, coolly, "The day after to-morrow, at five in the afternoon, I shall be at your service."

"I shall be punctual," said Gersdorf, bowing as he took leave of Molly, who thought best at last to comply with the paternal command and to allow herself to be taken home. On the staircase, however, she declared, resolutely, "Papa, the day after to-morrow I will not be locked up again. I mean to be there when my lover presents himself."

"The day after to-morrow you will be in the country," Ernsthausen asserted, with emphasis. "You will depart by the early train; I shall myself see you safely to the railway-carriage, and when you arrive your granduncle will receive you, and will keep you with him for the present."

Molly's curly head emerged from her white hood in speechless horror. But only for a moment was she silent; then she assumed a warlike attitude: "I will not go, papa. I will not stay with my granduncle; I will run away and come back to town on foot."

"You will hardly do that," said the councillor. "I should think you knew the old gentleman and his principles better. After his death you will be a most distinguished match,—remember that!"

"I wish my granduncle would go to Monaco and gamble away all his money," Molly retorted, sobbing angrily, "or that he would adopt some orphan and leave her every penny he possesses!"

"Good heavens, child, you are mad, absolutely mad!" Ernsthausen exclaimed in desperation, but the little Baroness went on excitedly:

"Then I should be no match at all, and could marry Albert. I mean to pray fervently that my granduncle may commit some such folly, in spite of his seventy years!"

Still sobbing, she sprang into the carriage and buried her face in the cushions. Her father followed her, muttering, "A terrible child!"

The brilliant rooms gradually became more empty and more quiet. One after another the guests took their leave, until finally the president, having bidden farewell to the last, was left alone with Wolfgang in the spacious reception-room.

"Waltenberg has invited us to inspect his collection of curios," he said. "I shall hardly have time to go, but you——"

"I shall have still less," Elmhorst interposed. "The three days at my disposal are already fully occupied."

"I know, I know, but nevertheless you must escort Alice; she and Erna have accepted Waltenberg's invitation, and I wish them to go."

Wolfgang was surprised; he looked keenly at his future father-in-law for an instant, and then asked, hastily, "Who and what is this Waltenberg, sir? You treat him with extraordinary consideration, and yet he appeared in your house to-night for the first time. Have you known him long?"

"Certainly. His father took part in several of my

schemes. A capital, prudent man of business, who would have amassed millions had he lived longer. Unfortunately, the son has inherited none of his practical ability. He prefers to travel all over the earth and to consort with all kinds of savage nations. Well, his property permits him to pursue such follies, and it has just been nearly doubled. His aunt, his father's only unmarried sister, died a few months ago, leaving him her heir. He came home, indeed, only to arrange his affairs, and is already talking of going away again. An incomprehensible man !”

The tone in which Nordheim spoke of the man for whom he had shown such consideration betrayed his entire want of sympathy with him personally, and Elmhorst seemed to be of the same mind, for he instantly observed,—

“I think him insufferable! At table he talked exclusively of his travels, and precisely as if he were delivering a lecture. All you heard was of ‘blue depths of water,’ ‘waving palms,’ and ‘dreamy lotus-blossoms.’ It was intolerable! Fräulein von Thurgau, however, seemed quite carried away by it. I must confess, sir, I thought all this poetic Oriental talk far too confidential for a first interview.”

The words were meant to be ironical, but they hardly concealed the speaker's irritation. The president, however, did not observe it, but replied, quietly, “In this case I have no objection to such confidences; quite the contrary.”

“That means—you have intentionally brought them together.”

“Certainly,” Nordheim replied, in some surprise at the eager haste with which the question was put. “Erna is nineteen; it is time to think seriously of her

settlement in life, and as her relative and guardian it is my duty to provide for it. The girl is greatly admired in society, but no one has as yet presented himself as her suitor. She has no money."

"No, she has no money," Wolfgang repeated as if mechanically, and his look sought the adjoining room, where the ladies still lingered. Alice was sitting on the sofa, and Erna stood before her, her slender white figure framed in by the door-way.

"I cannot blame the men," the president continued. "Erna's only inheritance is the couple of thousand marks paid for Wolkenstein Court; and although I shall of course furnish my niece with a trousseau, that would be nothing for a man whose demands upon life are at all great. Waltenberg has no need of money,—he is wealthy himself, and of excellent family; in short, a brilliant match. I planned it immediately upon his return, and I think it will succeed."

He explained everything in a cool, business-like fashion, as if the matter under discussion were some new speculation. In fact, the 'settlement' of his niece was for him an affair of business, as had been his daughter's betrothal. In the one case money was necessary in exchange for a bride, in the other intelligence and ability, and Nordheim could express himself with perfect freedom to his future son-in-law, who occupied the same point of view and had acted upon principles similar to his own. But just now the young man's face was strangely pale, and there was an odd expression in the eyes fixed upon the picture framed in by the arched door-way and brilliantly illuminated in the candle-light.

"And you think Fräulein von Thurgau is agreed?" he asked, slowly, at last, without averting his gaze.

"She will not be such a fool as to reject such good fortune. The girl is, to be sure, possessed by unaccountable fancies, obstinate as her father, and on certain points not to be controlled. We scarcely harmonize in our views, any one can see that, but this time I think we shall agree. Such a man as Waltenberg with his eccentricities is precisely after Erna's taste. I think her quite capable of accompanying him in his wanderings, if he cannot make up his mind to relinquish them."

"And why not?" Wolfgang said, harshly. "It is so uncommonly romantic and interesting, life in foreign lands with no occupation and no country. With no duties to exercise any controlling influence, life can be dreamed away beneath the palms in inactive enjoyment. To me such an existence, however, seems pitiable; it would be impossible for me."

"You are really indignant," said Nordheim, amazed at this sudden outburst. "You forget that Waltenberg has always been wealthy. You and I must work to attain eminence; no such necessity exists for him,—he has always occupied the height towards which we must climb. Such men are rarely fit for serious exertion."

He turned to a passing servant and gave him an order. But Wolfgang stood motionless and gloomy, his gaze still fixed upon the white figure 'compounded as it were of air and Alpine snow, with the white fairy-like flower of its waters crowning its fair hair,' and inaudibly but with intense bitterness he muttered, "Yes, he is rich, and so he has a right to be happy."

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER CLIME.

WALTENBERG'S dwelling was somewhat remote from the central portion of the city ; it was a fine, spacious villa, surrounded by a garden which was almost a park. It had been built by the father of the present possessor, and had been occupied by him until his death. Since then it had been empty, for the son, always travelling in distant lands, was far too wealthy to think of renting it. He left it in charge of a trustworthy person, whose duty it had been to receive, to unpack, and to arrange the various chests and packages sent home by his master from time to time, until now, after the lapse of a decade, the closed doors and windows were again opened, and the desolate rooms showed signs of occupation.

The large balconied apartment in the middle of the house was still furnished precisely as it had been in the lifetime of its former master. There was no magnificence here as in the Nordheim mansion, but on every hand was to be observed the solid comfort of a well-to-do burgher. The persons present at this time in the room, however, looked strangely foreign. A negro black as night, with woolly hair, and a slender, brown Malay lad, both in fantastic Oriental costume, were busy arranging a table with flowers and all kinds of fruits, while a third individual stood in the middle of the room giving the necessary directions.

The dress of this last was European in cut, and seemed to be something between the garb of a sailor

and that of a farmer. Its wearer was an elderly man, very tall and thin, but at the same time most powerfully built. His close-cut hair was grizzled here and there, and his furrowed, sunburned face was scarcely less brown than that of the Malay. But from the brown face looked forth a pair of genuine German, blue eyes, and the words that issued from the man's lips were such pure, unadulterated German as is spoken only by those to whom it is the mother-tongue.

"The flowers in the centre!" he ordered. "Herr Waltenberg wishes it to be romantic; he must have his way. Said, boy, don't stand the silver *épergnes* close together like a pair of grenadiers; put them at either end of the table, and the glasses on the side-table where the wine is to be served. Do you understand?"

"Oh, yes, master," the negro replied, in English.

"And speak German. Do you not know that we are in Germany, on this God-forsaken soil where you freeze stiff in March, and where the sun appears once a month, and then only at the command of the authorities? I detest it, as does Herr Waltenberg. But you must learn German, or, true as my name is Veit Gronau, you'll repent it. You're still half a heathen, and Djelma there is a whole one. See how he stares! Do you understand a word I say, boy?"

The Malay shook his head. Evidently his progress in the German tongue was slow, and the negro, who was much farther advanced, was obliged to come to his assistance frequently.

"It is the master's fault; he talks your gibberish to you too often," Veit Gronau grumbled. "If I did not insist upon your speaking German neither of you would understand a syllable of it. There! now the

table is ready. All fruit and flowers, and nothing really fit to eat and drink. That, I suppose, is romantic; I think it crazy, which is very much the same thing, after all."

"Are there ladies coming?" Said asked, inquisitively.

"Unfortunately, yes. It is no pleasure, but an honour, for in this country they are treated with immense respect, very differently from your black and brown women; so behave yourselves!"

He would probably have continued his admonitions, but at this moment the door opened and the master of the house entered. He glanced at the table loaded with flowers and fruit, signed to Said to retire to the antechamber, spoke a few words in some Indian tongue to Djelma, who straightway disappeared, and then turning to Veit Gronau, said, "President Nordheim has sent an excuse, but the rest are coming; Herr Gersdorf has also accepted. You will escape for this time the encounter you have so dreaded, Gronau."

"Dreaded?" the other repeated. "Hardly that! It certainly would have given me no great pleasure to meet an old playmate with whom I was once on most familiar terms, and to be honoured by him with a condescending nod when I was presented to him as a kind of servant."

"As my secretary?" Waltenberg said, with emphasis. "I should not suppose such a position could be in any wise humiliating."

Gronau shrugged his shoulders: "Secretary, steward, travelling companion, all in one. True, you have always treated me like a fellow-countryman, and not as an inferior, Herr Waltenberg. When you picked me up in Melbourne I was very near starvation, and I should have starved but for you. God requite you!"

"Nonsense!" said Ernst, repudiating his gratitude almost harshly. "You were a priceless discovery for me, with your knowledge of languages and your practical experience, and I think we have been well content with each other for these six years. So the president was one of your playmates?"

"Yes, we were the children of neighbours, and grew up together until life parted us, sending one hither and the other thither. He always prophesied to me, and to Benno Reinsfeld, who was one of us, that I should be a poor devil."

Waltenberg had gone to the window, and was looking out with some impatience while nevertheless listening attentively. The youth of the man whom he had known only in the midst of wealth and luxury seemed to interest him.

"Of course all three of us entertained vast schemes for the future," Veit continued, with good-humoured self-ridicule. "I was to go abroad and return a wealthy nabob, Reinsfeld was to astound the world with some wonderful invention; we were boys who imagined that the universe belonged to us. But Nördheim, the wise, poured cold water upon our heated brains. 'Neither of you will ever achieve anything,' said he, 'for you do not understand expediency.' We jeered at the calculator of twenty with his wonderful sagacity, but he was right. I have wandered about the world, and have tried my hand at everything, but I have always been poor as a church mouse, and Reinsfeld with all his talent was left in the lurch as a paltry engineer, while our comrade Nordheim is a millionaire and a railway king,—because he understood expediency."

"He certainly has always understood that," Wal

tenberg said, coolly. "He occupies an extremely influential position—— But there come our guests."

He hastily left the window and went to receive his friends. A carriage had drawn up before the door, bringing Frau von Lasberg and Alice, escorted by Elmhorst. Wolfgang had not succeeded in evading the duty of accompanying his betrothed, and he had no excuse for refusing an invitation which his future father-in law regarded with such favour. He therefore submitted to necessity, but any one who knew him could see that, in spite of the extreme courtesy with which he greeted his host, he was making a great sacrifice. The two men, who had instinctively disliked each other from the first, hid their antipathy under a strictly courteous demeanour.

"Fräulein von Thurgau is late; she drove to the court-councillor's to call for Baroness Ernsthäusen." Frau von Lasberg, who gave this information, was rather surprised by it herself. She had supposed that Molly was in the country under the secure guardianship of her granduncle; instead of which a note had arrived in the morning for Erna begging her to call for her on her way to Herr Waltenberg's. Her journey must have been postponed, probably for several days. But the old lady's surprise was transformed to indignation upon the entrance of Herr Gersdorf. Actually a rendezvous! And the ladies of Nordheim's family were made accomplices as it were, since Molly was under their protection. This must not be concealed from the girl's parents: they should hear of it this very day; and Frau von Lasberg, who was not at all inclined to play the part of a guardian-angel, received Herr Gersdorf with icy coldness. Unfortunately, it did not produce the slightest impression upon him;

there was an expression of great content upon his grave features, and he took part in the conversation with unusual readiness.

Meanwhile, Erna had called at the court-councillor's, where she had waited in the carriage for five minutes before the little Baroness appeared in a state of great agitation, quite startling her friend by the stormy embrace with which she greeted her.

"What is the matter, Molly?" she asked. "You seem quite beside yourself."

"I am betrothed!—betrothed to Albert," the girl exclaimed, "and we are to be married in three months! Oh, my granduncle is the dearest, most delightful of men! I could kiss him if he were not so very ugly!"

Erna's composure was not so easily shaken as Molly's, but, knowing as she did the views of the entire Ernst-hausen family, this news was certainly surprising.

"Your parents have given their consent?" she asked. "And so suddenly? It seemed quite impossible a few days ago."

"Nothing is impossible!" Molly cried, in a rapture. "Oh, I prayed so fervently that my granduncle would commit some folly! But I never dreamed of this; and you will hardly believe it, Erna,—you cannot!"

"Do talk sensibly. Pray explain yourself," said Erna.

"He has married! Seventy, and married! He is a bridegroom. Oh, I shall die of laughter!" And she did laugh until the tears came.

"The old Baron—married?" Erna repeated, incredulously.

"Yes, to an old maid of irreproachable descent. The affair was arranged long ago; but it was kept secret, because he was afraid of a scene with my

father and mother. He came to town simply and solely to alter his will, which was left with his attorney, and immediately after his return he had the knot tied fast by church and state, and papa says he has left all his money to his bride, and we shall not have a penny, so I am no match at all. Think what good luck!"

The young girl ran on without pausing for an instant, so that it was impossible to interpose a word. She scarcely gave herself time to take breath before she began again: "They had actually formed a conspiracy,—papa and your wise old duenna, to whom I owe something for her conduct as long as I live. I was to be tied up like a parcel and sent to my granduncle's address. My prayers and tears were of no avail,—my trunks were packed. Suddenly my granduncle's letter announcing his marriage fell into the midst of us like a bombshell. Papa looked ready to have a stroke, mamma went into violent hysterics, and I danced about my room tossing the things out of my trunks, for of course the journey was out of the question. The next morning was like the calm after ten thunder-storms; my granduncle was excommunicated with bell, book, and candle. There was a secret conference between my parents, and when Albert came in the afternoon, he was accepted without a word."

"And you were absolutely happy, I am sure," Erna at last contrived to interpose.

"No; at first I was angry," Molly declared, with a little grimace, "Albert behaved so prosaically. Instead of talking of our eternal love and our half-broken hearts, he told my father the exact amount of his income, and explained his prospects. Of course I was listening in the next room, and I was outraged; but

papa and mamma seemed really quite gentle and amiable. At last they called me in, and there was general embracing and emotion. Of course I cried too, although I would far rather have danced, and I was provoked with Albert for not shedding a single tear! A telegram was despatched to my granduncle,—it will embitter his honeymoon,—and to-morrow the announcements of the betrothal are to be sent out, and in three months we are to be married.”

In the excess of her happiness the little Baroness threw her arms around her friend and embraced her afresh. The carriage, however, now reached its destination, and Molly’s supreme moment of triumph was at hand. While the master of the house was receiving Fräulein von Thurgau, Gersdorf, secure in his lately-acquired right, hastened towards his betrothed, thus provoking an indignant glance from Frau von Lasberg. “I supposed you had already left town, Baroness,” she remarked, in her sharpest tone.

“Oh, no, madame,” Molly replied, with the most innocent air. “I did, it is true, propose to pay my granduncle a visit, but as he is just married——”

“What?” asked the old lady, imagining she had not heard correctly.

“The marriage of my granduncle, Baron Ernst-hausen of Frankenstein, and my betrothal took place at the same time. Allow me, madame, to present my betrothed to you.”

The smile on Waltenberg’s face at these words showed that he was in the secret, but Frau von Lasberg sat quite dumfounded, and it was not until all the rest had eagerly pressed around Molly with their wishes for her happiness that she made up her mind to utter a few formal, congratulatory words, which the

girl received with a smile that was not without malice. But Molly was too happy to-day to have refused forgiveness to her worst enemy, and her brilliant gaiety was contagious. All present seemed greatly to enjoy the occasion, although, as Gronau expressed it, 'there was nothing fit to eat.' He required some refreshment more solid than fruit, rare as such exquisite fruit was at this season of the year, and something better to drink than the heavy, fragrant cordial, which could be but sparingly sipped. The ladies, however, did not seem to share his opinion, and all left the table in a most cheerful mood to inspect the host's collection, which occupied the entire upper story.

Waltenberg conducted his guests up the staircase, and when the tall folding-doors opened into the suite of rooms, the entire party seemed suddenly transported as by magic from the gray wintry atmosphere of this northern March day to the sunny, glowing East.

Foreign treasures from every zone were here heaped up in such lavish profusion as only years spent abroad, and abundant means, could make possible; but the arrangement of this almost priceless collection would have driven a man of science to despair. There was not the faintest attempt at order of a scientific kind, —picturesque effect alone was aimed at, and this was achieved; groups of exotic plants placed here and there combined to present a picture before which all preconceived ideas of a genuine 'collection' vanished.

Rugs of the richest Oriental fabrics and colours covered the walls and draped the windows and tables; gorgeously ornamented weapons were hung against these tapestries; cabinets contained specimens of glass and porcelain exquisite in hue and shape; skins of

tigers and lions were spread upon the floor; and Said and Djelma in their fantastic costume added to the foreign effect, which was heightened by the yellow light which penetrated the coloured glass of the windows and bathed the whole in what seemed a magical southern sunshine.

Waltenberg was a delightful cicerone. He led his guests from one room to another, explaining and pointing out rare objects of art, and enjoying to the full their appreciation of his treasures. As he told of how and where this and that article had been obtained, his hearers were impressed with the strange, unreal character of the life the man had led. It was natural that he should address himself especially to Erna, for the girl's remarks showed intense interest in the fantastic character of her surroundings. Elmhorst preserved a courteous but cold reserve in his expressions of admiration, and Alice and Frau von Lasberg were soon wearied.

Gersdorf, who was familiar with his friend's collection, played the part of guide to his betrothed; by no means an easy task, for while Molly desired to see and to admire everything, her chief object of interest was her Albert. She fluttered about like some gay butterfly just escaped from the chrysalis, and was so like a joyous child at sight of each new and rare object, that Frau von Lasberg felt it her duty to interfere, although she knew well how little such interference would avail. She actually barred the young girl's way while Gersdorf was talking with Alice.

"My dear Baroness, I really must remind you that there are proprieties which a young girl must observe when she is betrothed. She should preserve her feminine dignity, and not proclaim to all the world that

she is quite beside herself with delight. A betrothal is——”

“Something heavenly!” Molly interrupted her. “I should like to know how my granduncle behaved; if he longed to dance all day long as I do?”

“One would suppose you still a child, Molly,” the old lady said, indignantly. “Look at Alice; she too is betrothed, and has been so for only a few days.”

Molly clasped her hands with an expression of mock horror: “Oh, yes, but heaven defend me from a lover like hers!”

“Baroness, you forget yourself!”

“Indeed I cannot help it, madame; but Alice is quite content, and Herr Elmhorst is the pink of courtesy. All that one hears is, ‘Does this please you, my dear Alice?’ and, ‘Just as you choose, my dear Alice.’ Always polite, always considerate. But if Albert should treat me with such cool deference, his manner always at the freezing-point, I should straightway send him back his ring.”

Frau von Lasberg heaved a long sigh. It was plainly impossible to impress Molly with a sense of decorum, and she held her peace, whereupon the girl, forgetting all the old Baroness’s admonitions, shot off like an arrow to rejoin her lover.

Meanwhile, Elmhorst had entered into conversation with Veit Gronau, who had been presented to him as to the rest as Waltenberg’s private secretary, and who, true to his expressed opinion that the presence of ladies was an honour but not a pleasure, held himself aloof from them. Of course they talked of the objects about them, and Wolfgang said, pointing to the negro and the Malay, who were busy in bringing forward for closer inspection various articles indicated by their

master, "Herr Waltenberg seems to prefer foreigners for servants; and you too, Herr Secretary, in spite of your name and your German tongue, appear to me more than half a foreigner."

"You are right," Gronau assented. "I have been away from Germany for twenty-five years, and never thought to see old Europe again. I met Herr Waltenberg in Australia; that black fellow there, Said, we brought back from an African tour, and we picked up Djelma only the year before last, in Ceylon, which is why he is still so stupid. We lack only a pig-tailed Chinaman and a cannibal from the South Seas to make our menagerie complete."

"There is no disputing about tastes," Elmhurst said, with a shrug; "but I am afraid that Herr Waltenberg has become so entirely estranged from his native land in all his habits of life that he will find it impossible to live here."

"We have no idea of doing so," Veit replied, with blunt frankness. "How under heaven could we ever reconcile ourselves to the dull existence led here? We shall leave Germany as soon as possible."

Involuntarily Wolfgang breathed a sigh of relief. "You appear to have no special love for your native land," he observed.

"None at all. As Herr Waltenberg says, one must outgrow all national prejudices. He delivered me a long sermon upon that text when on the ship coming home a bragging American undertook to revile Germany."

"What! you quarrelled with him for so speaking?"

"Not exactly. I only knocked him down," Veit said, coolly. "It did not come to a quarrel; he picked himself up and ran to the captain, who made himself rather

disagreeable, but Herr Waltenberg finally interfered, and paid the man for his outraged dignity, and I was quite a distinguished person thereafter. Not another word was uttered in dispraise of Germany."

"I had a deal of trouble, however, in arranging the affair," said Waltenberg, who overheard the last words. "If the man had refused to be appeased, we should have had no end of annoyance. You behaved like an irritable game-cock, Gronau, and the provocation was not worth it."

"Why, what would you have had me do?" growled Gronau.

"Shrug your shoulders and keep silent. Of what importance is the opinion of a stranger? The man had a right to his views, as you had to yours."

"You seem indeed to have outgrown all 'national prejudice,' Herr Waltenberg," Wolfgang said, with evident irony.

"I certainly consider it an honourable distinction to be as free from prejudice as possible."

"But under certain circumstances one neither could nor should be thus free. Doubtless you are right, but I should have been in the wrong with Herr Gronau; I should have acted as he did."

"Indeed, Herr Elmhurst? Such sentiments from *you* surprise me."

"Why from *me*?" The tone in which the question was put was sharp and cold.

"Because you seem to me perfectly capable of preserving your self-control. Your entire personality is indicative of such decision, such perfect command of circumstances, that I am convinced you always know what you are about. Unfortunately, that is not so with us idealists; we ought to learn of you."

The words sounded courteous, but the sting in them made itself felt, and Elmhorst was not a man to allow them to pass unresented. His look grew dark: "Ah, indeed? You consider yourself an idealist, Herr Waltenberg?"

"I do,—or do you count yourself among them?"

"No," Wolfgang said, coldly; "but among those quick to resent an insult."

His attitude and manner were so provoking that Waltenberg perceived the necessity for moderation, although his nature rebelled against yielding to the 'fortune-hunter' who confronted him so proudly. What turn the conversation might have taken, however, it is impossible to say, for Herr Gersdorf here interrupted it. He had no suspicion of what was going on, and turned to Wolfgang with, "I have just heard, Herr Elmhorst, that you leave town to-morrow. May I beg you to carry my warm remembrances to my cousin Reinsfeld?"

"I will do so with pleasure, Herr Gersdorf. I may tell him of your betrothal?"

"Certainly. I shall write to him shortly, and trust we may see him upon our wedding-tour."

Waltenberg had turned away, quite conscious that he could not possibly provoke a quarrel with his guest, and well pleased that Gersdorf had intervened. Veit Gronau, however, seemed suddenly interested.

"Pardon me, gentlemen," said he: "you mentioned a name which I remember from the time of my boyhood. Are you speaking of the engineer Benno Reinsfeld?"

"No, but of his son," Gersdorf said, in some surprise,—“a young physician, and a friend of Herr Elmhorst's.”

"And the father?"

"Dead, more than twenty years ago."

Gronau's rugged features worked strangely, and he hastily passed his hand across his eyes:

"Ah, yes, I might have known it. When one inquires after twenty-five years he finds death has been busy among his friends and comrades. And so Benno Reinsfeld is gone! He was the best of us all, and the most talented. I suppose his inventive genius never brought him wealth?"

"Had he a gift that way?" asked Gersdorf. "I never heard of it, and it was never recognized, for he died a simple engineer. His son has had to make his own way in the world, and has become a very clever physician, as Herr Elmhorst will tell you."

"An extremely skilful physician," Elmhorst declared; "only too modest. He has no capacity for bringing himself and his talent into notice."

"Just like his father," said Gronau. "He always allowed himself to be thrust aside and made use of by any one who knew how to do so. God rest his soul! he was the kindest, most faithful comrade man ever had!"

Meanwhile, Waltenberg had joined Erna von Thurgau at the other end of the room. He had just shown her a rarely beautiful specimen of coral, and as he replaced it he said, "Have you been at all interested? I should be so glad if my 'treasures,' as you call them, could arouse more than a fleeting interest with you; I might then look for some indulgence in those grave eyes, in which I seem always to read reproach. Confess, Fräulein von Thurgau, that you cannot forgive the cosmopolite for becoming so entirely estranged from his home."

"At least I can now make excuses for him," said Erna, smiling. "This enchanted domain is fascinatingly bewildering; it is difficult, nay, almost impossible, to withstand its spell."

"And yet these are only the mute, dead witnesses of a life inexhaustible in beauty and charm. If you could see it all in its home where it belongs, you would understand why I cannot exist beneath these cold northern skies, why I am so powerfully attracted to lands of sunshine. You too would find their charm irresistible."

"Perhaps so. And still I might be possessed in your lands of sunshine by intense yearning for the cool mountains of my home. But we will not dispute about a question that only a trial could decide, a trial that I shall hardly make."

"Why should you not make it?"

"Because such an amount of freedom is not accorded to my sex. We cannot wander about the world alone at will as you do."

"Alone!" Ernst repeated, in a low tone. "But you might trust yourself to a protector, a guide who would reveal this new world to you, whose delight it would be to unlock its pleasures for you. You may visit it some day with such a one beside you."

His last words were spoken so as to be audible to Erna alone. She looked up at him in surprise, and encountered a glance of such unmistakable passion that she changed colour and involuntarily turned aside.

"It is very improbable," she said, coldly. "One must have a natural inclination for such a life, and I——"

"You are made for it," he eagerly interrupted her,—

"you alone among hundreds of women. I am sure of it."

"Are you so wonderfully gifted with insight, Herr Waltenberg?" the girl asked, calmly. "We meet to-day for the second time,—surely your estimate of the character of a stranger is overbold."

The rebuff was evident; Waltenberg bit his lip. "You are right, Fräulein von Thurgau," he replied, "perfectly right. In this world of forms and unrealities one may easily be mistaken in an estimate of character. There is no intensity of feeling here, and an ardent word that rises involuntarily to the lips may well be accounted overbold. All here must conform to times and rules. I beg pardon for my inadvertence."

He bowed and joined the other ladies. Erna felt relieved by his absence; she had received his evident attentions without attaching any importance to them, without a suspicion of her uncle's plans. It certainly was bold to address her thus in a second interview, but it was not offensive, and she—she liked what was bold and unusual, inconsistent with form and rule. Why did she so shrink from his half-concealed declaration? Why did a kind of terror possess her at the thought of ever being obliged to face the question at which he had hinted? She could not answer.

Frau von Lasberg now rose to go. In truth, the visit had been greatly prolonged, and all took leave. Farewells and courteous expressions of pleasure were interchanged, and Ernst Waltenberg took pains to show himself to the last the amiable, courteous host. But he hardly succeeded in controlling the mood which his conversation with Erna had induced. There was a degree of constraint in his manner of taking leave of his guests, and he was relieved by their departure.

He stood looking gloomily after the carriages as they rolled away, and then turned back to the deserted rooms.

He was deeply wounded and vexed by the rebuff he had met with. It grated upon his impassioned nature like a breath from the icy north which he so detested; he retired to his beloved Orient, which here surrounded him with its lights and colour. But something of the chill seemed to linger here,—everything looked dreary and colourless,—it was, after all, but a lifeless image of the reality.

“Mister Gronau, what ails the master?” asked Said, who appeared after a while with Djelma in the balconied room to clear away the table. “He wants to be alone; he’s in a very bad humour.”

“Yes, very bad,” Djelma added, quick to use the few German words he knew.

Veit Gronau had also observed the master’s change of mood, but could find no explanation for it. However, in his reply to the servants he unconsciously hit the nail upon the head. He said, briefly, “It is all because he invited ladies. Wherever there are ladies there is always sure to be trouble.”

“What, always?” asked Said, who seemed hardly to understand.

“Always!” Gronau declared, impressively. “No matter whether they are white or brown or black, they always make trouble. And so the only thing to do is to keep out of their way. Remember that, you scoundrels.”

CHAPTER IX.

THE HERR PRESIDENT SPEAKS.

SUMMER had come; it was only early summer still however, in the mountains, for it was the middle of June; but the woods and meadows were clothed in fresh green, and only the loftiest peaks wore the mantle of snow which was never laid aside. Up there neither spring, summer, nor autumn had any existence: winter reigned in eternal, icy splendour.

The extensive Alpine valley which three years ago lay undisturbed in its solemn, dreary solitude, now showed all the traces of the human intellect which was then just invading it with its host of obedient forces. Dark openings yawned in the walls of rock, and from the depths a narrow path wound upward in serpentine lines,—the iron road to which forest and rock had been forced to yield,—while across the Wolkenstein chasm the masterpiece of the whole gigantic undertaking, the bridge, now wellnigh completed, seemed to hover in air above the dizzy depths.

It had been no easy task to build this railway, and the Wolkenstein domain had presented the greatest obstacles to its completion. They seemed actually to spring out of the ground at every step; the most careful calculations continually turned out to be imperfect, well-devised schemes proved ineffectual, unforeseen catastrophes occurred, and more than once imperilled the success of the undertaking.

But the man who conducted the road through the Wolkenstein section was equal to every difficulty, was

daunted by no obstacle, discouraged by no catastrophe. He proceeded on his way with his myrmidons, step by step subjecting to his sway the rugged and hitherto unquelled nature of the Alpine fastnesses.

The railway company was well aware of the force it possessed in its superintending engineer, and now extolled the wisdom of its president in the choice it had at first opposed. Gradually a power to act almost without limits was placed in the hands of the young man, and he knew well how to keep and to use it. The engineer-in-chief had long given nothing save his name to the undertaking; every project, every decision, was the work of his energetic and talented chief of staff, and when the young man was betrothed to Nordheim's daughter and became the probable heir to millions, all opposition was mute,—everything bowed before him.

Every trace of Wolkenstein Court had vanished; it was levelled to the ground the year in which its master closed his eyes forever. There was no longer any need to regard the feelings of the eccentric old man whose heart had been broken by the invasion of his home. On the spot where the ancestral abode of the Thurgaus had once stood there was now a stately structure, the future railway-station, built just at the entrance of the huge bridge. Until the line of railway should be opened in the coming spring, the building was occupied by various offices, and Superintendent Elmhorst had his rooms in the upper story. It formed, so to speak, the head-quarters of the Wolkenstein section, and the centre of gravitation of the entire railway.

Wolfgang had established himself here after the manner which had become a necessity to him since

his salary had been increased. The bright, spacious apartments had a most comfortable aspect, the pleasantest being his office, with its dark hangings and rugs, its carved oaken furniture, and its well-filled bookshelves. The corner window before which the writing-table was placed commanded the entire view of the great bridge. The bold structure was always before the eyes of its architect.

Elmhorst sat at his writing-table talking with Benno Reinsfeld, who had just appeared. The young physician was unchanged in person and manner, except that he had become rather more unconventional and awkward. Long years passed in a retired mountain-village, the laborious nature of the practice of a country doctor, and constant intercourse with men for whom the forms of society did not exist, had produced their effect.

At present, indeed, the Herr Doctor was in full dress; he wore a black coat, which saw the light only on state occasions; unfortunately, its cut was that of ten years previous. He certainly did not show in it to advantage, it pinched him too much; his gray jacket and felt hat were infinitely more comfortable. There was no denying that Reinsfeld looked a good deal like a peasant, and he was probably conscious of it himself, for he was enduring with a very meek air the reproaches of his friend, who shook his head as he looked at him.

"Do you want me to present you to the ladies in that coat?" he said, irritably. "Why did you not put on your dress-coat, at least?"

"I have no dress-coat," Benno said, by way of excuse. "There is no use for one here, and it would have been a needless expense; but I have had my old hat

ironed out, and I bought myself a pair of gloves in Heilborn."

He produced from his pocket as he spoke a huge pair of gloves, intensely yellow of hue, and displayed them with much self-satisfaction to his friend, who looked at them in dismay.

"But, good heavens, you are not going to wear those monsters!" he cried. "They are a great deal too big for you."

"But they are quite new, and such a fine yellow," Benno rejoined, disappointed, for he had reckoned upon some expression of approval of his unwonted outlay in the interest of his toilet, having made up his mind to such expense only after due consideration.

"You will cut a pretty figure at the Nordheims'," said Elmhorst, shrugging his shoulders. "There is positively nothing to be done with you."

"Wolf, must I pay this visit?" the doctor asked, in a tone of piteous entreaty.

"Yes, Benno, you must. I want you to treat Alice while she is here, for her wretched health makes me very anxious. She has had all sorts of physicians in town and at Heilborn, but each one's diagnosis is different from all the rest, and not one of them has done her any good. You know how highly I rate your medical skill, and you will not refuse to do me this favour."

"Certainly not, if you desire it; but you know my reasons for wishing to avoid any personal intercourse with the president."

"What! that old difference with your father? After all these years, who remembers it? Hitherto, in accordance with your wishes, I have not mentioned your name, but now when I ask your help for my betrothed

I am forced to introduce you. Besides, you will not meet my future father-in-law, for he was going back to town this morning. Confess, Benno, your true reason is that you are so used to practising among your peasants that you would if you could avoid intercourse with ladies."

Perhaps he was right in this conjecture, for Reinsfeld did not contradict him, he only sighed profoundly.

"You will absolutely degenerate in the life you lead," Wolfgang went on, impatiently. "Here you have been planted for five years in this wretched little mountain-nest with a practice which makes the most tremendous demands upon you, and brings you but the poorest remuneration, and here you will perhaps stay all your life, only because you have not the courage to grasp anything else that offers. How can you endure such an existence?"

"My home certainly does present an aspect unlike that of your rooms," said Benno, good-humouredly, as he looked around him. "But you always had the tastes of a millionaire, and years ago you determined to be one, and you understand how to grasp fortune boldly; no one can deny that."

Elmhorst frowned, and replied, in an irritated tone, "What! you too? Must I always be assailed by these hints as to Nordheim's wealth, as if my importance were entirely due to my betrothal? Am I nothing of myself any longer?"

Reinsfeld looked at him in surprise: "What do you mean, Wolf? You know that I enjoy your good fortune with all my heart, but you are strangely sensitive whenever I allude to it, although you certainly have every reason to be proud, for if ever a man achieved a speedy and brilliant success, you are that man."

Upon Wolfgang's writing-table stood a photograph of Alice in a richly-carved frame. It was a likeness, but a very unflattering one; there was little justice done to the delicacy of her features, and the eyes were entirely without expression. That slender, overdressed girl produced the impression of one of those nervous, superficial creatures who are so frequently to be met with in the fashionable world. This seemed to be Dr. Reinsfeld's opinion; he looked at his friend and then at the picture, remarking, drily, "Your attainment of your goal, however, has not made you happy."

Wolfgang turned upon him: "Why not? What do you mean?"

"Come, come, do not be angry again. I cannot help it, you are much changed from the Wolfgang of a few months ago. I hear of your betrothal, and expect you to return to me beaming with the triumphant consciousness of the realization of all your plans, instead of which you are now always grave, not to say out of humour, and irritable to a degree,—you who used to be so even-tempered. What is the matter with you, Wolf? tell me."

"Nothing. Let me alone," was the rather peevish reply; but Benno went up to him and laid his hand upon his shoulder:

"If your betrothal had been an affair of the heart I should think something there had gone wrong, but——"

"I have no heart; you have told me so often enough," Wolfgang interposed, bitterly.

"No, you have nothing but ambition,—absolutely nothing," Reinsfeld rejoined, seriously.

Elmhorst made an impatient gesture: "Don't lecture me again, Benno! You know we never shall under-

stand each other on that point. You are, and always will be——”

“An overstrained idealist who would rather eat dry bread with the darling of his heart than drive about in a gorgeous equipage beside a grand wife whom he did not love. Yes, I am unpractical in the extreme, and since at present I have not bread enough for two, it is fortunate that there is no darling of my heart.”

“We must go,” said Wolfgang, rising; “Alice expects me at twelve o’clock. And now do me the favour to look your best. I do not believe you know even how to make a bow.”

“My patients are glad enough to be cured without one,” said Benno, defiantly. “And if I do you no credit in your betrothed’s society, it is your own fault: why do you take me there like a lamb led to the slaughter? I suppose Fräulein von Thurgau is there too?”

“She is.”

“And has she grown to be a grand lady too?”

“I suppose you would call her so.”

These answers were not very reassuring to the poor doctor, who looked forward to this visit with positive dread. He did not rebel, however, for he was accustomed to yield to his friend. So he took from the table his hat, which, in spite of its late ironing, did not belie its years, and prepared to draw on the yellow gloves, saying, submissively, “Well, then, what must be, must.”

Beyond the line of railway, about half a mile from the future station, lay the president’s new villa. The house, built after the fashion common in the mountains, with an overhanging roof and graceful galleries, accorded well with its surroundings, while everything

within was arranged to suit the grand scale upon which Nordheim's mode of life was conducted. The views of the finest portions of the mountain-range were magnificent, the meadows about the villa had been laid out in gardens, and the adjoining forest so cleared as to form a natural park. There had been an immense outlay of money that the place might serve for a six-weeks' residence in the summer, but Nordheim never took the expense into account when he laid his plans, and had given his architect *carte blanche*. Elmhorst had, in fact, created a masterpiece of beauty in this mountain-retreat, and it was to be his wife's property.

Within, all appearance of simplicity vanished. The sunlight came through costly coloured glass to fall upon brilliant rugs and hangings, while carpeted stairs and corridors led to suites of apartments which, if not so splendid as those in the city, quite equalled them in luxury, and from every room there was an exquisite distant view.

Hither the president had now brought his family, and Alice was to pass the summer months here for the sake of the mountain-air which had been prescribed for her. As usual, Nordheim himself had no time to spend in relaxation; he stayed only long enough to oversee the work on the railway before he was recalled to town by business. He had intended to take his departure in the early morning, but several letters had arrived to which he was obliged to attend, and this had delayed him for a few hours. His carriage was waiting while he himself sought out his niece, with whom he wished to speak before leaving for town.

Erna's room was in the upper story; the glass door

leading out upon the balcony was open, and outside lay Griff comfortably stretched out in the sunshine.

The dog was almost the only relic left the girl of her home; but Griff she had insisted upon taking with her when she left Wolkenstein Court, in spite of the opposition of her uncle and of Frau von Lasberg, who could not endure 'the creature.' At the suggestion of leaving it behind there had been a scene; Erna had positively refused to go from the house unless Griff accompanied her, and Nordheim had yielded at last upon condition that the dog was never to be admitted to the drawing-room.

This condition had been fulfilled; and, moreover, Griff had grown extremely well behaved, and it would now never have occurred to him to raise a riot in any room. He was no longer a puppy, but had developed into a magnificent animal. There was something lion-like in his appearance as he lay with huge, tawny paws stretched out, his large black eyes following every movement of his young mistress.

Something special must have occurred to bring the president thus to Erna. He was wont to have neither time nor inclination for the joys of domesticity; he was absent from his home for weeks and months at a time, and when there, was seen by his family only at meal-times. Even his relations with his daughter were far from intimate, and with his niece he stood on a very formal footing. He lived and moved in the world of affairs; everything else was subordinate to his business interests.

He entered Erna's room in his travelling-suit, and said, without sitting down and as if by the way, "I wanted to tell you that an hour ago I had a letter from Waltenberg. He came to Heilborn yesterday, intend-

ing to spend some weeks there, and will probably pay you a visit to-morrow."

The words seemed to be carelessly spoken, but they were accompanied by a keen glance at Erna, who received the intelligence with indifference, and replied, "Indeed? I will let Alice and Frau von Lasberg know."

"Frau von Lasberg knows it already, and will pay him all requisite attention; but I should wish a certain regard accorded him from—another quarter. Do you hear, Erna?"

"I was not aware, uncle, that I had seemed regardless of your guest."

"My guest? As if you did not know as well as I what attracts him to this house, and what has brought him to Heilborn. He wishes to know his fate with certainty, and I cannot blame him for wearying, after being trifled with all these months."

"I have never trifled with Herr von Waltenberg," Erna rejoined, coolly. "I merely thought it best to maintain a degree of reserve with him, since he seems to imagine that he has only to stretch out his hand to obtain whatever he may desire."

"Well, we will not dispute about that, for you seem to have pursued precisely the right course, with your cool reserve. Men like Waltenberg, who make a positive cult of their liberty, and regard all family ties as so many fetters, need to be dealt with very carefully. Too ready a welcome might have made him shy. What is withheld attracts him."

The girl's eyes flashed indignantly: "Such calculation is yours, uncle, not mine!"

"No matter, if it is correct," said Nordheim, paying no heed to the reproach contained in her words. "I

have refrained from interfering hitherto because I saw that the affair was progressing as I would have it, but now I desire you no longer to avoid a declaration on Waltenberg's part. I have no doubt that he will shortly propose to you, and your answer——"

"May, perhaps, not accord with his wishes," Erna completed the sentence.

The president turned and looked searchingly at his niece: "What does that mean? You would not be insane enough to reject him?"

She was silent, but the same obstinacy was legible in her face that had characterized the girl of sixteen. Nordheim probably recognized the look and what it foreboded, for he frowned darkly.

"Erna, I confidently expect to find no obstacles in the way of my serious and well-considered plans. The matter in question is your marriage with a man——"

"Whom I do not love," she interrupted him.

Nordheim smiled, half contemptuously, half compassionately: "I supposed there was some exaggerated nonsense in the background. Love! What are called love-matches always end in disappointment. A marriage should be contracted upon a more sensible basis, and Alice sets you an example. Do you suppose that she was influenced by any romantic ideas in her betrothal, or that they have any weight with Wolfgang?"

"Oh, no; least of all with *him*," Erna said, with evident contempt.

"Which, of course, amounts to a crime in your eyes! Nevertheless I confide to him my daughter's future in the conviction that he will be to her an excellent husband. I certainly should not have chosen an enthusiast for my son-in-law. Waltenberg indeed can

allow himself any luxury in the way of romance,—his means are ample. He is as eccentric as yourself; in fact, you are extremely alike, and I cannot understand what objection you can have to him.”

“His egotism! He lives only for himself and for what he considers the enjoyment of life. He knows neither country nor profession, neither duty nor ambition, nor does he choose to know them, because they might disturb his enjoyment. Such a man can never live a life of earnest endeavour; he has no future, nor can he love a wife, for he loves himself alone.”

“He offers you his hand, however, and that is the matter to be considered at present. If you require in your future husband only ambition and energy, you should have married Wolfgang. He *has* a future,—for that I’ll go warrant.”

Erna shrank from him, and her tone was almost sharp as she exclaimed, “Spare me such jests, uncle, I pray you.”

“I am not given to jesting; but, by the way, Erna, your relations with Wolfgang are very unpleasant, and the manner in which you conduct yourselves towards each other is most disagreeable for those about you. Let me seriously request you to modify the extreme coldness of your manner to him. But to return to the subject of our talk. You seem to think that you have but to make your choice among a crowd of suitors of one who shall conform to your ideal. I regret being obliged to show you your mistake, but the truth is, you have no choice. A girl without means will certainly be admired and flattered if she is beautiful, but married she will not be, for men are very calculating. This offer is the first you have had, and will probably be the only one; moreover, it is a more brilliant one

than you had any right to expect. There is every reason why you should accept it."

His words were not uttered in a tone of well-meant admonition; there was something indescribably heartless and offensive in the way in which President Nordheim explained to his niece that in spite of her beauty she had no claim to be loved and wooed, since she was poor. Erna turned pale, and her lip quivered, but her face was by no means expressive of docility.

"And if, notwithstanding all this, I do not accept it?" she asked, slowly.

"Then you must abide by the consequences. Your position will hardly be an enviable one if you remain unmarried. Alice is to be married next year, as you know."

"And in the same year I shall be of age—and free!"

"Free!" sneered Nordheim. "How grand it sounds! Have you, then, been fettered in chains in my house, where you were received as a daughter? or are you longing for your patrimony? It is the merest pittance, and you are accustomed to the requirements of a lady."

"I lived with my father in the simplest way," said Erna, bitterly, "and we were happy. I have never been so in your house."

The president shrugged his shoulders: "Yes, you are emphatically your father's daughter. He too preferred to live in a peasant's hut rather than, with his ancient name, to have a career in the world. Well, Waltenberg offers you the freedom for which you pine. As his wife you can have wealth and position; he will fulfil your every wish, gratify your every whim, if you but understand how to manage him. For the last time I entreat you to take a rational view of the mat-

ter. If you refuse to do so, you and I have done with each other. I have no toleration for exaggerations, which appear to be hereditary in the Thurgau family."

Erna made no reply, and her uncle seemed to expect none, for he turned to go, pausing, however, on the threshold of the door to say, with frigid emphasis, "I confidently hope to find you betrothed when I return. Farewell!"

He left the room, and a few minutes afterwards his carriage rolled down the road.

Erna threw herself into an arm-chair, more agitated than she had cared to show to a man so cold,—a man who regarded her marriage as solely a business arrangement.

Betrothed! She had a dread of the word, so apt to beguile a maiden's ear; and yet she was beloved by this man: the only one who never questioned whether she were rich or poor, but asked only to carry her from this house, where money was all in all, far away into a world of freedom and beauty! Perhaps she might learn to love him, perhaps, in spite of all, he was worthy to be loved. Could she not overcome herself?

She covered her face with her hands. Suddenly she was aware of a gentle touch. Griff had approached unperceived, and was close beside her. He laid his huge head in her lap, and looked at her inquiringly out of his beautiful, large eyes as if he felt his young mistress's grief. She looked up; the dog was the only thing preserved to her from the time of her sunny, happy youth among the mountains with her father, whose idolized darling she had been. He had long been at peace in the grave, his dear old home had vanished from the face of the earth, and his only child

lived among those who were strangers to her in spite of the ties of kinship.

Suddenly the girl sobbed aloud, and as she threw her arms about the dog's neck she whispered, "Oh, Griff, if we were only in Wolkenstein Court once more! if these strangers had only never come! They brought death to your master, and to me what was far worse!"

CHAPTER X.

A PROFESSIONAL VISIT.

THE president's carriage was rolling along the mountain-road, the only one available until the railway should be opened, when Elmhorst and Reinsfeld left the former's rooms and took their way to the villa. Elmhorst of course did not wait to be announced,—the servants bowed low before the future son-in-law of the house, and he conducted his friend to the drawing-room. If the doctor had dreaded the visit beforehand, he was now completely crushed by his unaccustomed surroundings.

The room, with its luxurious carpets, its curtains admitting only a half light, its pale-blue hangings and furniture, seemed to him like some fairy realm. There were a few pictures on the walls, and a statuette of white marble peeped forth from a group of flowering plants that perfumed the air. All here was as fresh and delicate as though it had been Elf-land.

Unfortunately, Benno was not accustomed to the society of elves. He stumbled over the carpet, dropped his hat, and in stooping to pick it up wellnigh over-

turned a little table, which nothing but Wolfgang's dexterity preserved from a fall. He mutely endured the unavoidable introduction, made an awkward bow, and when Frau von Lasberg's cold, stern face arose upon his vision scanning 'this strange person' with evident surprise, he lost all self-possession.

Elmhorst frowned: he had not fancied it would be quite so bad as this; still, there was no retreat: the interview had to be gone through with, although, to poor Benno's great relief, he made it as short as possible. The embarrassed visitor held the recovered hat tightly in the hands adorned with the yellow gloves which were far too large, while his friend presented him to his betrothed.

"You have promised me, dear Alice, to consult Dr. Reinsfeld, and this is he. You know how anxious I am about your health."

The tone in which the words were spoken was anxious and considerate, but there was no tenderness in it. Reinsfeld, who had been quite crushed by the magnificence of the Baroness, scarcely dared to lift his eyes to the young heiress, who, he was sure, must be infinitely haughtier and more magnificent. He stood like a victim at the altar, when suddenly the gentlest voice in the world addressed him: "I am so very glad to see you, Herr Doctor; Wolfgang has told me so much about you."

He looked up amazed into a pair of large brown eyes in which there was certainly no disdain. His head had been filled with the satin-clad and lace-shrouded lady of the photograph, but in her stead he saw a delicate little figure in a thin, white morning-gown, her light-brown hair twisted in a loose knot, her lovely face pale and weary, but the reverse of

haughty. He was positively startled, and stammered something about 'exceeding pleasure,' and 'great honour,' soon, however, coming to a stand-still.

Wolfgang came to his aid with some remark as to the purpose of the visit, wishing to afford his friend an opportunity to show himself at his best as the skilful physician. But to-day Benno belied his entire nature. He asked several questions, but his manner was that of one suing for mercy; he stammered, he blushed like a girl, and, worse than all, he was conscious of how unbecoming was his behaviour. This robbed him of the last remnant of self-possession; he sat gazing at the young lady imploringly, as if entreating her forgiveness for annoying her by his presence.

Whether it were this same imploring expression or the childlike sincerity and gentleness, which, in spite of the young man's embarrassment, were evident in the dark-blue eyes lifted to her own, that touched Alice, she suddenly felt moved to say, with extreme kindness, "You will hardly be able to judge of my health in this first visit, Herr Doctor, but be sure that I shall place implicit confidence in Wolfgang's friend."

And she held out to him a transparent little hand, which lay like a rose-leaf in his own as he said, with far more earnestness than the occasion warranted, "Oh, thank you, thank you, Fräulein Nordheim!"

Frau von Lasberg's face plainly showed her doubt of the capacity of a physician whose first visit to a patient so overwhelmed him with stammering confusion, and who was so profusely grateful for nothing. And this man was Elmhurst's friend, and Alice seemed quite content. The old lady shook her head, and said, with much reserve, "You are wont to be very chary of your confidence, my dear Alice."

"I am all the more pleased that she should make an exception in my friend's favour," Wolfgang interposed. "You will not regret it, Alice. I assure you, Benno's acquirements and skill will bear comparison with those of his most distinguished fellows. I am always remonstrating with him for not exercising them in a wider field. He is sacrificing his life here in a subordinate position, and only last year he refused a most advantageous offer."

"But you know, Wolf——" Reinsfeld attempted to interrupt this praise.

"Yes, I know that a couple of little peasants who were ill so absorbed you that you let the opportunity slip."

"Ah, was that the reason?" Alice asked, in an undertone, glancing again at the young man, who looked as if he were being accused of some crime.

"The Herr Doctor practises among the peasantry, if I understand aright?" said Frau von Lasberg. "Do you really drive up the mountains to the secluded cottages scattered here and there?"

"No, madame, I walk," Reinsfeld explained, simply. "I have, it is true, been obliged of late years to buy a mountain-pony for extreme distances, but I usually walk."

The lady cleared her throat and looked significantly at the engineer, who was intrusting his betrothed's health to a doctor of peasants. Benno was now entirely out of her good graces. Wolfgang understood her look, and smiled rather contemptuously as he said, "Yes, madame, he walks; and when he reaches his home after an expedition through snow and ice, he works away at a scientific treatise that will one day make him famous. But no one must know anything about that. I discovered it only by chance."

"Pray, pray, Wolf!" Benno protested, in such embarrassment that Elmhorst could not but release him. He observed that his friend had a medical visit to pay, and thus allowed him to take his leave. How this leave was taken the poor doctor never quite understood; he only knew that the delicate white hand was held out to him in token of farewell, and that the kindly brown eyes were lifted half compassionately to his own. Then Elmhorst took his arm, piloted him past all the flowers and statuettes, and then the door was closed between him and the fairy realm.

In the antechamber he asked, timidly, "Wolf—did it go off so very badly?"

"God knows, it could hardly have been worse," was Elmhorst's irritated reply.

"I told you before, I am unused to society," Benno said, piteously.

"But you are a man nearly thirty, and can be resolute enough by the bedside of a patient; while to-day you behaved like a school-boy who has not learned his task."

Thus he hectored his friend after his usual fashion, and Benno meekly submitted. Only when he was entreated earnestly to collect himself and be more sensible the next time, did he ask, in a half-frightened, half-pleased tone, "May I come again, then?"

Elmhorst fairly lost patience: "Benno, I really do not know what to think of you. Have I not begged you to take charge of my betrothed's health?"

"But the old lady was much displeased,—I could see that," Reinsfeld observed, dejectedly, "and I am afraid that Fräulein Nordheim too thinks——" He paused and looked down.

"I do not ask the Baroness Lasberg's permission in

my plans for my betrothed," Wolfgang said, haughtily. "And my influence with Alice is supreme. Since it is my wish, she has accepted you for her physician."

The doctor eyed him askance: "Wolf, you really do not deserve your good fortune."

"Why not? Because I take the helm into my own hands thus early? You do not understand, Benno. When a man without means, like myself, enters a family like Nordheim's, he must choose whether to rule, or to occupy a very subordinate position. I prefer to rule."

"You are a monster to talk of ruling that delicate creature!" Benno broke out, angrily.

"Of course I did not mean Alice," Wolfgang rejoined, coolly; "her nature is extremely gentle, and she is used to yield to the will of another. I merely take care that this other shall be myself. You need not look at me so angrily; my wife will never find me a tyrant. I know she needs the greatest forbearance and care, and she shall always find them at my hands."

"Yes, because she brings you a million," Benno muttered, as he turned to go. Elmhorst detained him.

"You have not told me your opinion of Alice?"

"At present I have formed none. She seems to be in an extremely nervous condition, but I must have more opportunity of observation."

"As much as you please. *Au revoir.*"

"Adieu."

They parted, and while Wolfgang returned to his betrothed the doctor left the villa. He seemed in haste, for he strode quickly up a mountain-path, and did not stay his steps or look back until he had reached a distant point.

There, behind those windows with white lace cur-

tains, lay the fairy realm, where they were now ridiculing and laughing at the awkward fellow who had so plainly, in every word and gesture, shown his unfitness for the Nordheim drawing-room. Involuntarily he glanced at his gloves, which had seemed to him so extremely elegant an hour before, and in a sudden fit of impatience he tore them off and tossed the innocent yellow things into the thicket of pines. One fell on the ground, but the other was caught upon a bough, where it dangled and nodded like a huge sunflower. This irritated its owner still more, and he was half minded to send his hat after it, when he bethought himself in time that he really could not dispose of his entire wardrobe thus.

"You cannot help it, old fellow!" he said, sadly, looking at his venerable beaver. "I am not used to polite society. I wonder whether *she* is laughing too?"

There was no explanation as to whom the 'she' referred to, but certainly for a time Dr. Reinsfeld was as miserable a man as could be found among the mountains. The consciousness of his want of society tact oppressed him terribly.

CHAPTER XI.

ON THE ALM.

SAINT JOHN'S day!—the people's holiday from legendary times, preceding Midsummer day, all redolent with mystery, when hidden treasures rise from the depths and allure wondrously, when the slumbering

forces of magic awaken, and the entire elfin world of the mountains reveals itself in its wonder-working power. The people have not forgotten the ancient festival of the sun's turning, and legend still throws its veil about the sacred midsummer-time, when the sun mounts highest, when the earth shows fairest, and warm, fresh life courses throughout nature.

In the country about Wolkenstein this day was one of the grand yearly festivals. The inhabitants of the lonely, secluded Alpine valley which the railway was to open to the world the ensuing year were devoted to their customs and habits, and clung closely to their superstitions. Here the Mountain-Sprite still held undisputed sway, and not merely as a devastating force of nature with snow-storm and avalanche; for most of the people she was enthroned bodily on the veiled summit of the Wolkenstein, and the beacon-fires which flamed up everywhere on St. John's evening had some hidden connection with the dreaded Spirit of the Mountain. Nothing was known here of the pagan significance of the bale-fire, nor of Christian legend gathered about it; the people in their superstition clung directly to their own mountain-legends, which they credited fully.

The clear, mild, June day was near its close; the sun had set; a crimson glow still lingered about the loftiest mountain-tops. All the other heights were lightly veiled in blue mists, while the valleys lay in deep shadow.

High above the forests which clothed the foot of the Wolkenstein, where the projecting cliffs of the huge mountain began their rise, there was a smooth, green meadow, whereon stood a low hut. It was usually very lonely up here, and seldom visited by strangers,

since the ascent of the Wolkenstein was deemed impossible, but to-day it was enlivened by an unwonted stir and bustle. A huge wood-pile had been built upon the spacious meadow, many an ancient pine and hemlock having contributed to its erection. Gigantic logs of wood, dry branches, old roots, towered high in air. The bale-fire on the Wolkenstein was always one of the largest, and gleamed far and wide abroad over the country, for was it not lighted upon the legendary throne of the entire range, at the very feet of the Mountain-Sprite?

Around the pile was assembled a circle of mountaineers, mostly shepherds and woodsmen, with girls among them from the neighbouring alms, all powerful, sunburned figures, who lived up on the heights in sunshine and storm all through the summer, descending into the valley only when autumn reigned there. All were in merry mood: there were endless shouts and laughter; for people who worked hard day after day, and whose monotonous existence was rarely interrupted by any relaxation, the old popular festival was a joyous one.

To-day, however, they were not entirely left to themselves; there was a little group of spectators who had taken up a position on one side upon a low eminence. This was an unaccustomed sight for the mountaineers, and under other circumstances would have been an unwelcome one, for on such occasions they liked to feel themselves undisputed lords of their domain. But the young lady sitting on the mossy stone was no stranger among them, nor was the huge lion-like dog at her feet. The two had lived among these mountains for years, in old Wolkenstein Court, not a stone of which was now standing. True, the wild, joyous

child of those days had grown to be a grand young lady and lived in the fine Nordheim villa, which was nothing short of a fairy castle in their eyes, but the Fräulein came among them just as she used to do, and talked with them in their patois as of old; no one dreamed of thinking her a stranger.

Moreover, Sepp was with her; he had been ten years in the service of Baron Thurgau, and had superintended the affairs of the little estate, and the two strangers who had accompanied her did not look at all, with their brown faces, like city people. One of them had made Sepp bring him directly into the circle of mountaineers, where he was found to speak the patois perfectly, and was not one whit behind the rest in enjoyment of the fun. The other, who looked a far finer gentleman, with black hair and thick black eyebrows, stayed close beside the young lady, and had just leaned over her to ask rather anxiously, "Are you tired, Fräulein Thurgau? We never stopped once to rest as we came up."

Erna shook her head, smiling: "Oh, no, I have not yet forgotten how to climb. I used to go much higher, greatly to Griff's disgust; he regularly made a halt here when I clambered up the rocks, and he still remembers the place."

"Yes, I saw with admiration how lightly and easily you walked up. I fancy you would find the difficulties of travel mere child's play where other women could not possibly confront them. I am very proud of being your escort upon this bale-fire expedition."

"I should else hardly have been permitted to come. Frau von Lasberg was horrified at the idea of a nightly expedition among the mountains, and Alice is not strong enough to undertake anything of the kind. Sepp indeed long ago offered to accompany me, but

he was not thought sufficiently trustworthy, although he lived with us for ten years."

There was a shade of bitterness in the words, which did not escape the hearer.

"You would not have been permitted?" he asked, surprised. "Do you really allow yourself to be governed by others in such matters?"

Erna was silent, knowing well what a scene there had been when she expressed a desire to make this expedition. Frau von Lasberg had been almost beside herself at so eccentric and unbecoming an idea,—wishing to mingle among peasants after nightfall, and to witness their rude festivities. But it chanced that Ernst Waltenberg and his secretary arrived from Heilborn in the afternoon. He immediately offered to escort the young girl, and, as he was already regarded in the Nordheim household as Erna's future husband, the privilege was accorded him which had been denied to faithful old Sepp. Ernst was about to pursue his inquiries, when a stranger approached and said, half shyly, half familiarly,—

"Welcome home, Fräulein von Thurgau!"

"Dr. Reinsfeld!" exclaimed Erna, in delighted surprise, offering him her hand with the same confidence with which as a child she had treated him upon his visits to her father. He seemed at first amazed, but his face instantly lit up with pleasure as he grasped the offered hand with answering cordiality. In a moment Griff had recognized his old friend, and was leaping about him with every mark of delight.

"I did not have a glimpse of you yesterday when you were at our house," said Erna. "I did not know of your visit until you had gone."

"And I did not venture to ask for you; I did not

know whether you would like to have me claim acquaintance with you."

"Could you entertain such a doubt?"

There was reproach in her tone, but Reinsfeld evidently was not depressed by it, and he looked at the girl with sparkling eyes. He could see how much more beautiful, how much graver, she had become, but she was the same to him as of old, nor did he in her presence feel any of the timidity and embarrassment which had made him so awkward on the previous day.

"I had such a dread of seeing you a fine lady," he said, simply. "But, thank God, you are not that!"

The ejaculation seemed to come so directly from his heart that Erna laughed,—the same merry, childlike laugh to which she had for years been a stranger.

Waltenberg had at first observed with evident dismay the familiar greetings thus exchanged, and the look with which he had scanned Reinsfeld was darkly suspicious. Its result, however, could not but be satisfactory. This Herr Doctor in jacket and felt hat could hardly be a dangerous rival; the very ease and familiarity of his intercourse with Erna was the best of warrants that he was merely a friend of her childhood. Ernst Waltenberg was quite capable of perceiving this, and his manner when Reinsfeld was presented to him was extremely cordial.

"We are but just arrived," said the doctor, after the introduction had taken place, "and in all this merry turmoil we did not at first perceive you. But where has Wolfgang gone? I brought your future relative with me, Fräulein Thurgau. Wolf, where are you?"

His call was quite unnecessary, for Elmhorst was standing fifty paces off, looking fixedly at the group. Apparently he had not intended to join it; he now

slowly approached, and Benno could not but be surprised at the formality of the greetings interchanged between the 'future relatives.' Wolfgang bowed formally, and Erna's manner seemed to indicate that this meeting was anything but agreeable to her.

"I thought you were to be in Oberstein this evening, Herr Elmhorst?" said she. "You spoke yesterday of going there."

"I did, and I have been there with Benno, but he persuaded me to come up to the alm with him."

"That he may see a veritable bale-fire," Benno interposed. "There is one kindled in Oberstein too, but there the entire village, all the labourers on the railway, the engineers, and a crowd of guests from Heilborn are assembled, and so the fine old custom comes to be only a noisy spectacle for strangers. Up here we have the genuine unadulterated mountain-life. And there is Sepp! How are you, old fellow? Yes, we are here. You would rather we were not to-night, I know, and therefore I said not one word in Oberstein of our expedition. You must put up with us,—that is, with the Herr Superintendent and the stranger gentleman there,—for Fräulein von Thurgau and I belong here."

"Yes, you belong here," said Sepp, solemnly. "You surely ought not to be absent."

"I should like to protest against being treated as an entire stranger," said Wolfgang. "I have been living for three years in the mountains."

"But in constant war with them," Waltenberg interposed, half ironically. "That would hardly establish your right to feel at home among them, it seems to me."

"At most only the right of the conqueror," Erna

said, coldly. "Herr Elmhorst upon his arrival here was wont to boast that he would take possession of the realm of the Mountain-Sprite and bind it in chains."

"You see, however, Fräulein Thurgau," Wolfgang replied, in the same tone, "that it was no empty boast. We *have* brought her under subjection, the haughty ruler of the mountains. She made it difficult enough for us, so intrenching herself in her forests and fields that we were obliged to contend for every step of our way; but she was conquered at last. By the end of autumn the last structures will be completed, and next spring our trains will thunder through this entire Wolkenstein domain."

"I am sorry for the magnificent valley," said Waltenberg. "All its beauty will be lost when steam once takes possession of it and the shrill whistle of the locomotive invades the sublime repose of the mountains."

Wolfgang shrugged his shoulders: "I am sorry, but such romantic considerations cannot have any weight where the question is one of furnishing the world with roads for travel."

"The world which belongs to you! Here in Europe you have mastered it with steam and iron. We who would find some quiet valley wherein to dream undisturbed shall finally be obliged to seek it in some distant island in the ocean."

"Assuredly, Herr Waltenberg, if such dreaming seem to you the sole aim of existence. For us it is action."

Ernst bit his lip: he saw that Erna was listening, and to be thus reproved in her presence was more than he could bear; adopting, therefore, the same indifferent, high-bred tone with which he had tried to humiliate

the 'fortune-hunter' at their first interview, he said, "The old dispute, begun in the Herr President's conservatory! I never doubted your activity, Herr Elmhorst; you have certainly by its aid achieved brilliant results."

Wolfgang involuntarily held himself more erect; he knew what result was meant, but he merely smiled contemptuously. Here he was not merely 'the future husband of Alice Nordheim' as in society in the capital; here he was in his own domain, and with all the proud self-consciousness of a man perfectly aware of his talent and of his achievements, he replied, "You allude to my work as an engineer? The Wolkenstein bridge is indeed my first work, but it will hardly be my last."

Waltenberg was silenced. He had seen the gigantic structure spanning the yawning abyss, and he felt that he must give up treating as an adventurer the man who had devised it. Though he should aspire ten times over to the hand of the millionaire's daughter, there was stuff in this Elmhorst, even his antagonist must admit, however unwillingly.

"I have indeed admired the engineer of that magnificent work," he replied, after a pause.

"I am greatly flattered by your saying so,—you have seen all the finest bridges in the world."

The words sounded courteous, but the glances which the men exchanged were like rapiers. Each felt at this moment that something more than dislike—that positive hatred divided them.

Hitherto Erna had taken no part in the conversation; she probably perceived with whom the victory lay, for her voice betrayed annoyance as she interposed at last: "You had better give up contending with Herr Elmhorst. He is of iron, like his work, and

there is no place in his world for romance. You and I belong to quite another one, and the abyss between his and ours no bridge can span."

"You and I,—yes!" Ernst repeated quickly, turning to her. All strife was forgotten and all hatred dissolved in the joy that sparkled in his eyes as he said, almost triumphantly, 'you and I!'

Wolfgang retired so suddenly that Benno looked amazed. The doctor was talking with Veit Gronau, who had approached when he heard from Sepp the name Reinsfeld, and had introduced himself.

"You cannot possibly remember me," he was saying. "You were a very little fellow when I went abroad, so you must believe upon the evidence of my face that I was a friend of your father's when he was young. He died long ago, I know, but his son will not refuse me the hand which my old Benno cannot give me."

"Most certainly not," Benno assured him, pressing the offered hand cordially. "And now let me hear how it happens that you have returned to Europe."

CHAPTER XII.

THE BALE-FIRE.

THE last crimson reflection of sunset had long vanished, field and forest were covered with dew, and the darkness was softly creeping up from the valleys to the heights, while above the snow-peaks began to gleam with a silvery lustre,—the herald of the rising moon, which was not yet visible.

Then flames began to dart forth from the heaped-up wood on the Wolkenstein; at first only fitfully, crackling and smoking, until the fire caught the giant logs, and then it leapt aloft wildly with a magnificent ruddy glare, hailed by cheers from the circle of men around it,—the ancient bale-fire of the mountains.

It was wonderfully picturesque,—the scene to which the growing darkness added much in effect,—the flaming altar sending its sparks towards heaven, and around it in the red light the crowd of brown-visaged mountaineers in joyous motion. They chased and chaffed one another, and leaped around the fire, snatching and waving aloft the burning brands in unrestrained delight, to which the crackling and roaring of the flames added intensity, while above it all the smoke rolled and floated in thick clouds, now half veiling and anon revealing the scene below.

Erna and Waltenberg had not left their place,—probably preferring to keep somewhat aloof from the noisy crowd. At a little distance stood Wolfgang with folded arms, apparently lost in contemplation of the fantastic spectacle. Probably by chance, he had taken up a position where he was almost entirely in the shadow; all the more brilliant did the light seem which was thrown upon the little group on the hillock, the slender, graceful figure of the girl, the tall, dark form beside her, and the shaggy dog lying motionless at their feet, his head resting upon his huge paws.

Benno, standing near the fire with Gronau, now and then glanced towards them, but that other pair of eyes watched them intently from the gloom, and if sometimes their owner resolutely looked away towards the busy, happy throng, some mysterious force seemed to

compel his gaze to rest again upon the pair, who looked as if they already belonged to each other.

Erna, who had grown warm from climbing, had taken off her hat and laid it upon the mossy stone that served her for a seat, while Waltenberg leaned above her, conversing in a low tone. What he said had, perhaps, no special significance, but his look sought hers with a passionate eagerness which he took no pains to conceal. His eyes could well express the emotion which thrilled his whole being. The man whose thirst for freedom had so long defied the fetters of love was now hopelessly enthralled.

The conversation was carried on in an undertone, but Wolfgang distinguished every word; through all the shouting and laughter, through all the crackling and hissing of the flames, every syllable distinctly fell on his ear, for every nerve was strung in the effort to listen, as if for him life and death depended upon what was said.

"Inaccessible do you call the Wolkenstein?" asked Waltenberg. "That only means that no one has yet ascended it. It can be subdued, that haughty peak."

"Hitherto no one has subdued it, however," Erna replied. "Several have ventured up through the rocks to the foot of the topmost cliff, but there every one has been stayed; even my father, who was not easily daunted by any ascent and pursued the chamois to the highest summits, often declared, 'The Wolkenstein peak is inaccessible.'"

Ernst looked up at the peak, now only partially visible, and smiled: "Do you know, Fräulein Thurgau, your description tempts me to venture the ascent?"

She looked up at him in dismay: "Herr Waltenberg, you would not——?"

"Climb the Wolkenstein peak? At least I shall attempt it."

"Impossible! You are jesting."

"Do you think so? I hope to prove to you that I am in earnest."

"But why? What for?"

"Why does one undertake any adventure? Because the danger excites; because it is a victory, a triumph, to achieve the apparently impossible."

"And if this triumph should cost you your life? You would not be the first victim of the peak. Ask Sepp; he can tell you a sad story."

"Bah! I am no novice in such attempts. I have climbed higher mountains than your dreaded Wolkenstein."

His tone betrayed the defiant persistence of a man accustomed to danger, apt indeed to seek it. Nordheim was right: he longed only for what was withheld from him, and life had thus far withheld from him little enough. To climb a mountain-summit which no human foot had ever before trod, or to win a beautiful, proud woman who met his advances with coy reserve,—either attempt attracted him. He must win, subdue,—nothing was impossible.

The wind, which was rising, blew the flames to one side; they flickered and leaped, and a shower of sparks fell upon Wolfgang, who hardly noticed it. He remained motionless in the ruddy glare, which did not reveal his extreme pallor. The entire pile was now one mountain of flame, whence huge tongues soared aloft, higher and higher, invading the night with a fiery breath. The cool, dewy meadow, the dark forests, the steep declivities of the Wolkenstein,—all looked strangely transformed in the red, darting light beneath the clouds of smoke rolling overhead.

approaching. "Sepp proposes to take us down by the Vulture Cliff, but that shorter way seems slightly perilous."

"It certainly is by moonlight."

"Then we will give it up. I promised Frau von Lasberg to return early, and I must keep my word. Gronau can descend with the guide by the cliff, since he seems to want to do so. He can meet us on the high-road."

The little party set out together, Gronau and Sepp agreeing to meet it at an appointed spot in the road below. The meadow with the flickering flames soon vanished, and the silence of the mountain-forest replaced the shouting and laughter on the height. Silence also fell upon the descending group; they were obliged to walk heedfully, for the path, although neither steep nor perilous, lay in the shadow of the dense pine forest, which hid the moonlight except for a brilliant ray here and there. Waltenberg walked close beside Erna; the other two followed. Thus descending, they reached the edge of the forest in about half an hour and emerged upon the cleared mountain-side.

"The heights all around are still flaming," said Waltenberg, pointing upward, where, upon the other summits, the fires were yet blazing. "The Wolkensteiners lit their pile early. Her Majesty the Mountain-Sprite takes precedence, and she seems actually to mean to unveil in honour of the night."

He was right. The clouds that during the entire evening had hovered about the summit of the Wolkenstein and had veiled its peak were beginning to float away.

"I wonder that Gronau and Sepp are not here,"

Erna remarked. "They ought to have been here before us, since they took the shorter path."

"Perhaps they have met with some ghostly hinderance," said Benno, laughing. "It is Midsummer Eve, and the mountains are alive with fairies and spirits. I'll wager either that they have encountered some phantom, or that they are now searching for the treasures which rise from hidden depths to the surface on this night in the year. Ah, there they are!"

In fact, Sepp made his appearance on the other side of the road, but he was alone, and the haste of his approach boded ill.

"What is the matter?" said Waltenberg, going to meet him. "Has anything happened? Where is Herr Gronau?"

Sepp pointed in the direction of the Vulture Cliff: "Up there! We have had an accident. The gentle man slipped on the rocks, and his foot——"

"There are no bones broken?"

"No, 'tis not so bad as that, for we got down to even ground, but he could not go any farther. The gentleman is up there in the forest, and cannot move his foot, and I came to ask the Herr Doctor to look after him."

"Of course I must look after him," said Reinsfeld, instantly turning to go. "Where did you leave him? Far from here?"

"No; only a short quarter of a mile up."

"I will go with you," said Waltenberg, hastily. "I must see after Gronau. Pray stay here, Fräulein von Thurgau; you hear it is not far, and we shall return immediately."

"Would it not be better that we should all go up

together?" asked Elmhorst. "My aid might be necessary."

"Oh, a sprained ankle, or even a broken limb, is not dangerous," said Benno. "We three can do all that is necessary, even although we should be obliged to carry Herr Gronau; and Fräulein von Thurgau cannot be left here alone."

"Certainly not; Herr Elmhorst must stay with her," Ernst said, decidedly. "We will be as quick as possible, rely upon it, Fräulein von Thurgau."

The arrangement was a very natural one; fearless as the young lady might be, she could not be left here in the night alone, and Wolfgang, almost a member of her family, was, of course, the one to be left to take care of her. Nevertheless neither of them seemed pleased. Erna objected, and thought it would be better to accompany the doctor. But Waltenberg would not hear of it; he hurried away with Reinsfeld and Sepp over the meadow, and then all three vanished in the opposite wood.

Those left behind were obliged to accommodate themselves to circumstances. They exchanged a few remarks about the accident and its possible consequences, and then there was a long silence.

The midsummer night with its deep, mysterious stillness brooded above the mountains, but without the darkness of night. The full moon, now high in the heavens, bathed everything in its dreamy radiance. In its light the fires upon the mountains gleamed but dimly. They no longer flamed aloft, but looked like glowing stars fallen from the firmament and shining on the heights in clear, quiet beauty. By day there was a distant view from this meadow, now the mountain world was veiled in a delicate mist that left only

certain detached features distinctly visible. The rigid lines of the tall summits were softened, the thick forests were massed in bluish shadow; below, where yawned the Wolkenstein abyss, darkness still reigned, although the moonlight already silvered the bridge. It reached from rock to rock, like a narrow, shining plank, discernible by keen eyes even at this height.

The Wolkenstein summit alone, close at hand, was defined sharply against the clear sky of night. The forests at its feet, the jagged outlines of the billowy sea of rocks, and the gigantic proportions of the steep wall rising from them,—all were flooded with snowy lustre. Around its head there was still a fleecy vapour, which seemed slowly melting away in the moonbeams; at times each icy peak would be revealed clearly, to half vanish again in a semi-transparent veil. Erna had seated herself on the stump of a felled tree on the border of the forest. The scene fascinated her, as it did her companion, who was, nevertheless, the first to break the long silence.

"Herr Waltenberg could hardly achieve that ascent," he said. "It was scarcely necessary to warn him off so seriously; he certainly would have turned back at the foot of the rocky wall."

"You heard what we said?" the girl asked, without looking away from the Wolkenstein.

"I did. I was standing very near you."

"Then you heard that the attempt was relinquished."

"At *your* request."

"I was interested that it should be so; there is something distressing to me in all aimless foolhardiness."

"In *all*? I think Herr Waltenberg attached another significance to your words; and was he not justified in so doing?"

Erna turned and bestowed upon him a glance of disapproval: "Herr Elmhorst, you evidently consider yourself as already belonging to our family, but I cannot, nevertheless, accord you the right to ask such questions."

The rebuff was sufficiently plain. Wolfgang bit his lip.

"Pardon me, Fräulein von Thurgau, if I was indiscreet; but, from the remarks of my future father-in-law, I judged the matter to be no longer a secret."

"My uncle spoke of it to you? And before his departure?"

"Assuredly. And he also did so three weeks ago, when I was in the city."

A dark flush mounted to the girl's cheek. So the president had even then confided to his prospective son-in-law his plans for disposing of his niece, probably before her personal acquaintance with Waltenberg. All the pride of her nature was in revolt as she replied, "I know my uncle puts a price upon everything, and why not upon my hand? But in this case the decisive word is mine, as both he and you seem to have forgotten."

"I?" said Wolfgang, indignantly. "Can you suppose me to have any share in his plan?"

She looked at him, with a strange expression which he could not unriddle, and there was a shade of scorn in her voice as she replied, "No, certainly not in *this* plan."

"You would do me gross injustice by such a suspicion. Moreover, I have no liking for Herr Waltenberg, and I feel sure that, despite all his brilliant qualities, he is not fitted to make another human being happy."

"That is your opinion," Erna said, coldly. "In such

a case all that a woman takes into consideration is whether she is beloved without calculation or reserve."

"Ought that alone to be decisive? I should suppose there might be a question as to whether she herself loves."

The words came slowly and almost with hesitation from his lips, and yet his eyes were riveted in breathless eagerness upon the face so clearly revealed in the bright moonlight. There was no reply; Erna's glance avoided his: her eyes were fixed upon the distant scene. The mountain-fires were growing fainter; the largest, upon the Wolkenstein, still gleamed with starlike radiance.

Above these the wreathing mist was still floating, and the moonbeams called forth from it strange shapes, which, when the eye would have seized and held them fast, eluded it and melted away. Slowly, however, from among them the topmost peak emerged white and gleaming, the inaccessible throne of the Alpine Fay in her garment of eternal ice and snow.

Wolfgang approached the young girl and stood close beside her as he continued, in an undertone: "I have no right, I know, to ask this question, but doubtless you have put it to yourself, and the answer——"

A low, angry growl interrupted him. Griff had not forgotten his early antipathy for the superintendent; he could not endure to have him approach his mistress, and, as if to defend her, thrust himself between them. Erna laid her hand caressingly upon the dog's head, and he was instantly silent; then she asked, "Why do you hate Ernst Waltenberg?"

"I?" Elmhurst was apparently amazed by this counter-question, which found him entirely unprepared to reply.

"Yes. Can you deny that it is so?"

"No," said Wolfgang, with defiant frankness. "I confess it. I hate him!"

"You must have some reason for so doing."

"I have a reason. But you must allow me to follow your example and withhold the answer to your question."

"I will answer it myself. Because in Ernst Waltenberg you see my future husband."

Elmhorst started and looked at her with an expression of dismay,—nay, of positive terror: "You—know?"

"Do you suppose a woman cannot feel when she is loved, even though every means be resorted to to conceal it from her?" Erna asked, with extreme bitterness.

A long, oppressive pause ensued; Wolfgang's eyes were downcast; at last he said, in a low, dull voice, "Yes, Erna, I have loved you—for years!"

"And you wooed—Alice!"

There was harsh condemnation in her words; he stood silent with bent head.

"Because she is rich; because her hand can confer the wealth which I do not possess. Nevertheless Alice will not be unhappy; she neither knows nor demands happiness in the higher sense of the word, while I should be unutterably wretched bound to a man whom I despised."

"Erna!" he exclaimed, in torture.

"Herr Elmhorst?" she rejoined, haughtily.

He accepted the rebuff, and controlled himself by an effort: "Fräulein von Thurgau, you have felt yourself obliged to hate me since the hour of your father's death, and you have avenged yourself richly for a supposed injury. Well, then, I will endure your hate if so it must be, but *not* your contempt. I will not

suffer any longer from the cold scorn which I always see in your eyes. You well know how to wound with it, but I pray you—do not drive me to extremes.”

He really looked as if the farthest limit of his self-control were reached. The man usually so cool and calculating, of such iron resolution, absolutely trembled in the fever of his agitation.

Griff was still pugnacious, following with an angry eye every movement of him whom he considered a foe, and who seemed to be threatening his young mistress, who, however, took the dog by the collar and held him fast.

“Can you compel my esteem?” she asked.

“Yes, by heaven I can and will!” he broke forth. “I compelled respect but now from that insolent egotist, who despises money merely because he possesses it in abundance, and who parades as romanticism his dreamy, idle existence. You heard how he was silenced by my reference to my work. He does not know what it is to be poor, and to have bare, hard reality staring him in the face. But I drained that cup to the dregs in my needy youth; life for me possessed no poetry, no ideals. I felt within me the power to excel in my profession, and was tied down by hard mechanical labour. I had to submit to men my inferiors in intellect, and to obey where now I command. The plan of the Wolkenstein bridge, now regarded as such a wonder, was rejected again and again because I had no patronage, because a poor, unknown man is sure to be despised. But, in spite of it all, I determined to rise; not for the money’s sake, not that I might revel in idle luxury, but that I might work with freedom, undeterred by all the petty hinderances, to soar above which wealth gives wings. There stands my work!”

He pointed to the narrow road, which gleamed like silver above the abyss. "Whether you hate its designer or not, it must force even you to respect him!"

With like proud, bold self-assertion Wolfgang Elmhurst was wont to silence his opponents and to win the victory, but it stood him in no stead here. Erna had risen and stood confronting him, the scorn which he would not brook still looking from her eyes.

"No!" she said, decidedly. "That work of yours condemns you. The man capable of achieving that should have had the courage to depend upon himself, and to go forward alone, for he carried his future within him. My uncle recognized your talent long before you wooed his daughter; he had opened the way for you, and you could have attained your goal even without him. But that indeed would have cost time and trouble, and you wanted to take fortune by storm."

Wolfgang gazed sadly at the girl's agitated face. "Yes," he said, "I did. And I have paid a high price for it; perhaps—too high."

"The price now is your freedom; in future it may possibly be your honour."

"Erna! Have a care! Do not insult me!"

"I do not insult you. I only give utterance to what you do not yet choose to confess to yourself. Do you imagine that you can with impunity pledge yourself to a man like my uncle? You still have ambition; he has long been done with it, and now cares only for gain. He has, it is true, won millions, and gold flows into his coffers from every quarter, but he is not content. The magnitude of his undertakings does not affect him, except as it brings him money, and once

completely in his power he will require you to be the same. You will no longer create, you will only accumulate."

Wolfgang looked down gloomily; he knew that she spoke the truth; he had long known this side of the president's character, but his pride rebelled against the part thus assigned him.

"Do you think me so wanting in energy as to be unable to preserve my independence?" he asked. "I have a will, and if necessary can assert it, even in my present position."

"Then you will be given an alternative, and you will be obliged to submit. You have not chosen the hard, lonely path trodden by so many great men who could call nothing their own save their talent and their faith in themselves. For me,"—there was a kind of passionate inspiration in the girl's eyes,—“I have always imagined that in the striving and struggling there must be happiness perhaps even greater than that of attainment. To ascend thus from the depths, to be conscious that one's power increases with every step forward, with every obstacle overcome, and then at last to stand on the free heights in the joy of victory won by one's own exertions,—I have had some sensation akin to it when I have been climbing a difficult Alpine ascent, and not for worlds would I have accepted another's aid."

Carried away by the enthusiasm of the moment, she was again the free, unconventional child of the mountains, whom Wolfgang had once found amidst the abysses of the Wolkenstein, her curls waving, and quick to love as to hate. Together they had then bidden defiance to the tempest; in fancy he again heard her joyous, reckless laughter amid the hurly-

burly, and it seemed to him that he had then been happy, supremely happy, as never again since then.

"And could you have loved a man who had risen thus?" he asked at last, with suppressed suffering in his tone. "Could you have stood beside him in toil and danger, perhaps in defeat? Answer me, Erna,—I entreat you!"

Erna shivered; the light in her eyes faded, as she replied, coldly, "What need to ask? The question comes too late! One thing I know: the man who denied and crushed out his love for the sake of the gold which another hand could bestow, who bought his future because he lacked courage to create it, I never could have loved,—never!"

She took a long breath, as if with the words she cast aside a burden, and turned her back to him. Griff suddenly became restless; he perceived the approach of the rest although their advance was as yet inaudible; his mistress understood him.

"Are they coming?" she asked, in an undertone. "Let us go to meet them, Griff."

She slowly crossed the meadow, where the dew lay heavy and glistening. Wolfgang made no attempt to detain her: he stood motionless. The last of the mountain-fires had just sunk to ashes; it glimmered aloft for a few moments like a faint and fading star and then vanished.

The peak of the Wolkenstein, on the contrary, was plainly visible; the mists that had been hovering around it seemed to melt in the moonlight, and the ice-crowned summit stood forth distinct and glistening. She had unveiled herself, the haughty sovereign of the mountain-range, and sat enthroned aloft in her phantom-like beauty, while above her realm brooded the

silent mystery of the midsummer night, with its ghostly hint of buried treasures ascending from hidden depths and awaiting discovery,—the ancient, solemn midsummer-eve of St. John.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN OUTRAGED WIFE.

THE Sunday following St. John's day had always been a great holiday in Oberstein. The little mountain-village where Dr. Reinsfeld lived had, it is true, lost somewhat of its secluded character by the invasion of the railway in the vicinity. The labourers on the road frequented it, and some of the young engineers had their quarters in the little inn, but the place was still very humble in appearance.

The doctor's house was in no contrast to its surroundings; it was a small cottage, scantily furnished,—indeed barely provided with the necessities of life. The sexton's widow acted as the young physician's housekeeper, and her ideas of the duties of her position were primitive in the extreme. Only a nature as content and unassuming as Benno's could have long endured existence here. His predecessors had never remained long, while this was the fifth year that he had passed in this place, undaunted by its hardships, and with no present prospect of leaving it.

His study was indeed a contrast to the charming, comfortable apartments inhabited by Superintendent Elmhorst. The whitewashed walls were destitute of decoration save for a couple of portraits of Reinsfeld's

parents. An old worm-eaten writing-table, with an arm-chair covered with leather which had once been black, a very hard sofa with a coarse linen cover, and a table and chairs of equal antiquity,—such was the furniture, all purchased from the former occupant, of the room in which the doctor lived, and laboured, and gave advice, and even, as on the present occasion, received visits. His cousin Albert Gersdorf was with him.

The lawyer had come from Heilborn the day before, and had found a guest already installed here, Veit Gronau, whom he also knew, and who was recovering here from the effects of his disaster on the Vulture Cliff. The painful sprain from which he was suffering was not serious, but prevented his walking. He had been with some difficulty brought as far down the mountain as Oberstein, and here Reinsfeld had offered to take charge of the patient until the sprain was cured; an offer which had been gratefully accepted.

The two cousins had not met for years, and their interchange of letters had been infrequent, so that Benno's joyful surprise was natural when Gersdorf made his unexpected appearance. He had just persuaded him to protract his stay somewhat, and said, delightedly, "So, then, that is all arranged: you will stay until the day after to-morrow; that's right; and your young wife will have no objection to being left so long with her parents in Heilborn."

"Oh, she is extremely content there," Gersdorf explained; but there was an unusual gravity in his voice and manner.

The doctor gave him a keen glance: "See here, Albert: when you arrived yesterday it struck me that something was wrong. I thought you would bring your wife. Surely you have not quarrelled?"

"No, Benno, 'tis not so bad as that. I have simply been forced to make my father- and mother-in-law understand that their untitled son-in-law is perfectly capable of maintaining his position."

"Aha! 'sits the wind in that corner?" What has happened?"

"Not much. As I told you, we promised to finish our wedding-tour by a visit to my wife's parents in Heilborn, where my mother-in-law is taking the waters. We found her there in a very exclusive circle, which graciously admitted me, although it made me quite sensible that I owed the honour to my having married a Baroness Ernsthause. I showed but little appreciation of the amiable reception accorded me, inasmuch as I declined joining a picnic arranged for yesterday. Of course this provoked much aristocratic indignation; my respected mother-in-law declared me a tyrant, maintaining that her friends alone were fit associates for her daughter, and at last inducing Molly to be obstinate. I told her she was perfectly free to accept the invitation for herself, and she did so."

"And went without you?"

"Without me. An hour afterwards I was on my way to see you,—I meant at all events to see you before I went back to the city,—leaving behind me a brief note explaining my absence."

"It was a great piece of audacity on your part to marry into so aristocratic a family," said Benno, shaking his head. "You see marriage by no means puts an end to your troubles."

"No, but I was perfectly well aware that I should have to fight my way to independence."

"Can you be quite sure of your wife?"

Gersdorf smiled, both at the words and at the grave

tone in which they were uttered: "Indeed I can. Molly is still a child, it is true,—a spoiled child who has never been trained,—but her heart is true as steel. Do you suppose I enjoyed leaving the wayward little creature? She must learn that a husband's rights are to be respected; if I had yielded to my mother-in-law on this occasion there would have been no end to her interference, and that I will not tolerate."

It was plain to see that it had not been easy for the young fellow to keep his resolution; his eyes turned longingly to the window that looked out on the road to Heilborn, while Benno sat lost in admiration of his cousin's strength of character. He himself would have made any sacrifice to a tyrannical mother-in-law rather than grieve a woman whom he loved.

They were interrupted by the entrance of Veit Gronau. He still limped, but otherwise seemed quite well, as he deposited a large package on the table.

"What have you there?" asked Gersdorf.

"Genuine Turkish tobacco," Gronau replied; "and Herr Waltenberg sends his regards and he will come over this afternoon with the ladies from Wolkenstein, who wish to see the holiday dance. Said brought the message and this tobacco, which I asked Herr Waltenberg to send in pity for the doctor, who smokes wretched stuff, begging his pardon. Let me fill the pipes; I understand that business."

"That's true," said Benno, laughing. "You and Herr Waltenberg would smoke up my entire income in a year. I cannot afford to be fastidious."

Veit, who was entirely at home here, hobbled to a little cupboard, whence he took three pipes, which he proceeded to prepare, and the three men were soon filling the room with clouds of fragrant smoke.

Suddenly the door opened, and a most unexpected apparition appeared upon the threshold, in the person of a young lady in a very elegant travelling-dress, a veil wound about her hat, and a handsome travelling-bag in her hand. She was about to enter hastily, but paused as if petrified by the scene which was presented to her gaze. Gronau in all his length of limb lay stretched out on the sofa; the doctor, in his shirt-sleeves, was comfortably established in his arm-chair; Gersdorf sat near him astride of a chair, while the room was filled with a thick but unfortunately transparent cloud of blue tobacco-smoke.

"Herr Doctor," the voice of the old housekeeper was heard to say from the corridor behind the stranger, "a young lady has arrived, and wants——"

"I want my husband," the young lady interposed, in a resolute tone, advancing into the room, where she created a sensation indeed.

Gronau sprang up from the sofa, uttering a cry of pain as he did so, for his ankle resented the sudden motion; Benno started up in dismay and began looking for his coat, which it seemed impossible to find; and Gersdorf emerged from the cloud of smoke, exclaiming, in a tone of delighted surprise, "Molly!—is it you?"

"Yes,—it is I!" Frau Gersdorf declared in accents so annihilating that one might have supposed her husband had just been detected in the commission of a crime, and as she spoke she advanced with extreme dignity into the middle of the room, where, unfortunately, the smoke interfered with the solemnity of the occasion, for she began to cough and seemed almost ready to choke.

Poor Benno was crushed. He had privately exulted

when he had learned that there was no danger of a visit from his new distinguished relative, of whom he stood in such awe that for her reception he would have donned his grandest attire, and now here she was, and he in his shirt-sleeves! In his confusion he took his pocket-handkerchief and tried to flap away the smoke, but, unfortunately, he flapped it directly into the young lady's face, at the same time sweeping his clay pipe off the table where he had laid it, and overthrowing his arm-chair, the leg of which was broken in the fall. At last Gersdorf seized him by the arm: "Pray stop, Benno, or you will make things worse," he said, kindly. "First of all let me present you to my wife. My cousin, Benno Reinsfeld, Molly dear."

Molly bestowed a most ungracious glance upon this man in his shirt-sleeves who was presented to her as a relative,—really it was exceedingly provoking.

"I regret extremely having disturbed the gentlemen," she said, with a withering look at her husband. "My husband informed me that he should pay you a visit, Dr. Reinsfeld, but no time was appointed for his return."

"Madame," stammered Benno, in great confusion, "it is a great honour—and certainly——"

"I am glad to hear it," the lady interrupted him without more ado. "My luggage is outside; pray have it brought in. I shall stay here for a while."

This was too much; the doctor was in despair. He thought of the bare little garret room which was all he had had to offer to his cousin, and now here was a Baroness Ernsthausen about to occupy it also! Suddenly his wild, wandering glances fell upon the jacket he had been looking for so anxiously: it lay on the floor beside him; he snatched it up, and vanished into

the next room. Gronau, whose distaste for 'the ladies' was as decided as it was respectful, hobbled after him, closing the door, as he left the room, with a crash that shook the house.

"Have I fallen among savages?" Molly asked, indignant at this reception. "One shrieks, another runs away, and the third——!" She fairly shuddered at the thought that this third was her husband.

But Gersdorf cared not a whit for the frown upon her pretty face. Now that they were alone, he hurried towards her with outstretched arms: "And you really came, Molly?"

Molly withdrew from his embrace, retreated a step, and declared solemnly, "Albert,—you are a monster!"

"But, Molly——!"

"A monster!" she repeated, with emphasis. "Mamma says so, and she thinks I ought to requite you with scorn. That is why I came."

"Ah, indeed, is that why?" said Albert, relieving her of her travelling-bag. She allowed this attention, but maintained her dignified attitude.

"You have deserted me,—me, your lawful wedded wife,—deserted me shamefully, and upon our wedding-tour!"

"Pardon me, my child, you deserted me," Gersdorf protested. "You drove off with the picnic-party——"

"For a few hours! And when I returned you were gone,—gone to the wilderness,—for this Oberstein is no less,—and now here you sit in this detestable tobacco-smoke, smoking and laughing and joking. Don't deny it, Albert, you were laughing. I heard your voice plainly from outside."

"I certainly was laughing, but that is no crime."

"When your wife was away!" Molly exclaimed, an-

grily,—“when your deeply-injured wife was at that very moment bewailing the fate that has fettered her to a heartless husband! Oh, how could you!”

She sobbed aloud, and in her despair threw herself upon the sofa; bouncing up again instantly, however, in dismay at its extreme hardness.

“Molly,” her husband said, seriously, as he approached her, “you knew why I wished to avoid those people, and I thought my wife would have stood by me. I was very sorry to find myself mistaken.”

The reproof went home; Molly cast down her eyes and replied, meekly, “I care nothing for all those stupid people; but mamma thought I ought not to allow myself to be tyrannized over.”

“And you complied with your mother’s request rather than with mine, and preferred to mine the company of strangers.”

“You did so too,” sobbed Molly; “you drove away without a thought of your poor wife consumed with grief and longing!”

Albert put his arm around her caressingly, as he said, tenderly, “And were you really unhappy, my little Molly? So was I.”

His young wife looked up at him through her tears, and nestled close to him: “When were you coming back?” she asked.

“The day after to-morrow, if I could have managed to stay away so long.”

“And I came to-day. Is not that enough for you?”

“Yes, my darling, quite enough!” said Gersdorf. “And if you choose we will return to Heilborn this very day.”

“No, we will not,” said Molly, resolutely. “I have quarrelled with mamma, and with papa too; they did

not want me to come. I have brought our luggage, and now we will stay here."

"So much the better," said Albert, much relieved. "I went to Heilborn solely for your sake, and here we are really in the midst of the mountains. I am only afraid that we must try to find some other quarters; the doctor's house can hardly hold you with all your trunks."

The little lady turned up her nose as she surveyed the room, where the smoke still lingered and the broken pipe and the three-legged chair encumbered the floor.

"Yes, this seems a detestable bachelor establishment. You would grow careless enough with this cousin of yours, who rushes away like a madman if a lady makes her appearance. Has he no manners at all?"

"Poor Benno was so terribly embarrassed," Albert said, by way of excuse. "He completely lost his head. Be kind to him, Molly, I pray you, for he is the best fellow in the world. And now let me go look after your luggage."

He went, and Frau Gersdorf took her seat upon the sofa, with more caution than before. In a few moments another door was softly and timidly opened, and the master of the house appeared. He had employed the time of his absence in arranging his dress, and he now approached his guest with much humility. At first she seemed scarcely inclined to be as amiable as her husband had entreated her to be; on the contrary, she eyed her new cousin with judicial severity.

"Madame," he began, with hesitation, "pray pardon me that, upon your unexpected arrival—I was very sorry for it, very sorry——"

"For my arrival?" Molly interrupted him, indignantly.

"God forbid, no!" exclaimed Benno. "I only meant—I wished to observe that I am a bachelor."

"Unfortunately," said Molly, still ungraciously. "It is very sad to be a bachelor. Why do you not marry?"

"I?" cried Benno, dismayed at the question.

"Certainly; you must marry as soon as possible."

The words sounded so dictatorial that the doctor did not venture to contradict them; he merely bowed so profoundly that Frau Molly began to feel her irritation evaporate, and she added, in a milder tone,—

"Albert is married and likes it extremely. Do you doubt it?"

"Oh, no, assuredly not," poor Benno hastened to reply; "but I——"

"Well, you, Herr Doctor?" his new relative persisted.

"I am not accustomed to ladies' society, and my manners are very rude," he said, sadly,—*"very rude, madame,—and that unfits me for social enjoyment."*

This confession found favour with Molly. A man who felt his deficiencies so profoundly deserved sympathy. She laid aside her air of severity and rejoined, kindly,—

"They can easily be improved. Come, sit down, Herr Doctor, and let us discuss the matter."

"What! Marriage?" Benno asked, in renewed dismay. This seemed like an immediate settlement of his future life, and he was naturally startled.

"Oh, no: only your manners, for the present. You are anxious to learn, I can see; all you want is some one to advise and train you. I will do it!"

"Oh, madame, how kind you are!" said the doctor,

with so touching an expression of gratitude that his instructor of eighteen was entirely won over.

"I am your cousin, and my name is Molly," she rejoined. "We must call each other by our first names; so, Benno, come and sit down by me."

He complied with her invitation rather shyly, but the little lady soon put him entirely at his ease. She questioned him closely, and he soon grew very confidential; he told her about his awkwardness at the Nördheim villa, his consequent mortification, and his desperate but fruitless attempts to attain some degree of ease of manner. As he went on, all his awkwardness vanished and he showed himself as he was, frank, true, intelligent, and kindly. When Gersdorf returned at the end of a quarter of an hour, he found his wife and his cousin talking together like the best of friends.

"I have had the luggage brought here for the present," he said, "and I have sent to know if we can have rooms at the inn."

"Not at all necessary," said Molly; "we can stay here. I am sure Benno will make room for us; will you not, Benno?"

"Of course I will," the doctor exclaimed, eagerly. "I shall move out. Gronau and I can move into the garret, and you can have the lower rooms, Molly. I will go and have it arranged immediately."

He sprang up, and hurried out to do as he said.

"Benno?—Molly? You seem to have made astonishing progress in a few minutes!"

"Albert, your cousin is a very superior man," Molly declared. "We must befriend the young fellow; it is our duty as his relatives."

Her husband burst out laughing: "The young fel-

low? Allow me to observe, madame, that he is just twelve years your senior."

"I am a married woman," was the dignified reply, "and he, unfortunately, is a bachelor. But it is not his fault, and I shall have him married as soon as possible."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Gersdorf, "you have scarcely seen poor Benno, and you are already scheming to marry him? I beg you——"

He got no further, for his wife confronted him with an indignant air: "'Poor,' do you call him, because he is to be married? You think marriage a misfortune, then. Is it because your own is unhappy? Albert, what can you mean by such words?"

But Albert only laughed the more; undismayed by his wife's impressive manner, he clasped her in his arms, and said, "I mean that there is only one little woman in the world who can make her husband as happy as I am. Does this explanation content you?"

And Frau Gersdorf was content.

CHAPTER XIV.

MIDSUMMER BLESSING.

THE afternoon sun shone merrily down upon the gay assemblage on the green before the inn at Oberstein. Insignificant as the place was, it was a gathering-point for the inhabitants of all the scattered hamlets and farms in the country round, and all who could had come to the festival, which began with the service in

church in the morning, while the afternoon was given over to the usual holiday enjoyments.

The St. John's dance, which, in accordance with ancient custom, was always danced in the open air, had been going on for some time upon the improvised dancing-floor in front of the inn. The young peasants, both men and maidens, were engaged in it, while their elders were seated at small tables with their beer-glasses. The country musicians fiddled away unweariedly, and the children played hide-and-seek and ran hither and thither among the happy crowd. It was a lively, merry scene, and its charm was much enhanced by the picturesque holiday costumes of the mountaineers.

The presence of the 'city folk,' who had just appeared, did not in the least disturb the festivities, for the young engineers quartered in Oberstein joined in the dance, and the two swarthy servants brought by the foreign gentleman from Heilborn were objects of admiring wonder for the peasants.

Waltenberg and the Nordheim ladies were seated at a table in the little garden on one side of the inn, and here Herr Gersdorf and his wife joined them. Greatly pleased by this meeting, the entire party was in a very merry mood, with the exception of Frau von Lasberg.

She took no pleasure in any peasant festivities, even as a spectator, and she had, besides, had a slight headache, so she had resolved to decline joining the party. Elmhorst, however, had sent word that it would be impossible for him to escort his betrothed on this occasion, as there had been some damage caused to the lower portion of the railway by a freshet, and he was obliged to drive down to inspect it. Upon this the old

lady had resolved to sacrifice her comfort to her sense of propriety, which would not allow her to leave the two young ladies to be escorted only by Waltenberg, who was not as yet Erna's declared lover. She drove up the mountain with them, suffering an increase of headache in consequence, and now here was Molly, who had been in deep disgrace with the old lady since her marriage.

Molly knew this perfectly well, and took no pains to regain the lost favour. She expressed an ardent desire to join in the dance, declared that the elegant seclusion of the garden was a great bore, and finally proposed to mingle with the peasantry; in short, she nearly drove poor Frau von Lasberg to desperation.

"And if Benno comes, I shall dance with him although it should make Albert jealous," she said, with a glance towards her husband, who was standing with Erna and Waltenberg at the picket-fence looking on at the merriment on the green. "The poor doctor never has a moment's pleasure; just as we were setting out he was called to a patient, fortunately here in Oberstein, so he promised to follow us in half an hour. Alice, I hear that you are now under Benno's care."

The young lady nodded assent, and Frau von Lasberg remarked, condescendingly, "Alice conforms to the wishes of her betrothed, but I greatly fear that Herr Elmhurst over-estimates his friend when he attaches more value to his diagnosis than to that of our first medical authorities. And there is, at all events, great risk in intrusting his betrothed to the care of a young physician who, by his own confession, has practised almost exclusively among peasants."

"I think Herr Elmhurst perfectly right," Molly declared, with dignity. "Our cousin can easily compete

with the 'first medical authorities,' I assure you, madame."

Baroness Lasberg smiled rather contemptuously: "Ah, excuse me! I really forgot that Dr. Reinsfeld is now a relative of yours, my dear Baroness."

"Frau Gersdorf, if you please," Molly corrected her. "I am very proud of my husband's name, and of my dignity as a married woman."

"So I perceive!" the old lady remarked, with an indignant glance at the young wife who so paraded her matrimonial satisfaction, and who, nothing daunted, chattered on merrily,—

"What did you think of Benno, Alice? He was perfectly inconsolable for his awkwardness on that first visit. Were you really as annoyed by it as he thinks you were?"

"Your cousin's deportment was certainly not calculated to inspire confidence, Frau Gersdorf," the Baroness remarked, emphasizing the plebeian name; but to her immense surprise she here encountered opposition from her usually passive charge. Alice raised her head, and said, with unwonted decision, "Dr. Reinsfeld made a very agreeable impression upon me, and I entirely share Wolfgang's confidence in him."

Molly glanced triumphantly at the old lady, and was about to launch forth in praise of her 'relative,' when the man himself made his appearance.

To-day Benno was clad in his trim Sunday costume, which differed but little from that of the mountaineers of the district, and was generally adopted by gentlemen among the mountains. The gray jacket braided with green and the dark-green hat with its chamois beard became him admirably, setting off his powerful, well-knit frame to the best advantage; and here where

all around him was familiar he almost lost his shyness. He greeted his relatives and Erna cordially, and received Waltenberg courteously; even his bow to Frau von Lasberg was quite correct. It was only when he turned to Alice that the composure hitherto so bravely maintained forsook him; he blushed, and stammered, and cast down his eyes. At first he hardly understood what she said to him, hearing only the sweet, gentle voice, as kind in its tone as it had been before in 'fairy-land.' He partially recovered his self-control only when she spoke of her companion. "Poor Baroness Lasberg is suffering from a violent headache, and it has been worse since she sacrificed herself by driving up here with us. Can you suggest a remedy?"

Frau von Lasberg, who was sniffing at her vinaigrette, looked dismayed; she had no idea of intrusting her precious health to this peasant doctor. Reinsfeld modestly suggested that the pain had been increased by the broad sunshine and the noise, and proposed that she should retire for an hour to some cool, quiet room in the inn. He hurried away to call the hostess, who came immediately and conducted the old lady, who really felt quite ill and saw the advisability of taking the rest suggested, to a quiet room on the side of the house that looked away from the revellers.

"Thank heaven, now we are left to ourselves, and can go to the dance!" said Molly, rising to lead the way.

"What! among the peasants?" Alice asked, in alarm.

"In their very midst," the young wife undauntedly replied. "Do not look so horrified. You ought to thank God that your duenna has the headache, for else she never would have let you go. Benno, offer your arm to Fräulein Nordheim."

Benno looked equally horrified at this command; but Molly had taken possession of her husband, and Waltenberg had given his arm to Erna, so there was nothing for it but to obey.

"Fräulein Nordheim,—will you allow me?" he asked, timidly.

Alice hesitated a moment, but then, either tempted by the gaiety outside, or induced by the timid address, she smiled, and took the offered arm, to follow the others, who had already left the garden.

The pair walked slowly; the doctor was a rather mute cavalier: he hardly spoke, but looked with shy admiration at the young girl beside him, who did not, however, seem to him half so unapproachable and distinguished as she had been on their first interview. She looked graceful and simple in her light-blue muslin and her flower-trimmed straw hat; it was just the frame for her face, if only the face were not so pale. She was apparently somewhat afraid of the crowd, and when loud shouting was heard from the dancing-floor she paused, and looked up timidly at her escort.

"Are you afraid, Fräulein Nordheim?" he asked. "Then let us go back."

Alice shook her head, and replied, in an undertone, "I am unused to it; but I do not believe the people are really rude."

"Indeed they are not!" Benno declared. "There is nothing to fear from our Wolkensteiners,—that I can testify, having lived as long as I have among them."

"Yes, for five years, Wolfgang tells me. How have you managed it?"

The question was put in a tone of such compassion that Benno smiled: "Oh, it is not so terrible as you

suppose. It is, to be sure, a lonely life, and at times a laborious one, but it has its pleasures."

"Pleasures?" Alice repeated, dubiously, raising her large brown eyes to his, which so confused the doctor that he forgot to reply.

Suddenly there was a movement among the crowd: they perceived Reinsfeld for the first time,—for on his arrival he had come through the inn,—and instantly a circle was formed about him. "The Herr Doctor! Our Herr Doctor! Here he is!" resounded from all sides, while twenty, thirty heads were bared, and as many brown hands were stretched out to the young physician. Old and young thronged about him eager for a word or a look or to bid 'God bless' him. There was an outburst of enthusiasm at sight of their 'doctor.'

Reinsfeld glanced with some anxiety at his companion,—he feared she might be annoyed by these stormy demonstrations; but Alice seemed, on the contrary, to enjoy them; she clung rather closer to his arm, but she looked unusually happy and interested.

No sooner did the doctor explain that the young lady wished to look on at the dance than all began eagerly to arrange a place for her. The entire crowd about the doctor accompanied them to the dancing-floor; the rows of spectators were ruthlessly parted asunder, a chair was brought, and a few moments later Alice was seated in the midst of all the joyous tumult of St. John's day, and the sturdy mountaineers formed a sort of *garde d'honneur* on each side of her, taking care that the whirling couples did not fly past her close enough to brush the Fräulein's skirt. There was a certain rude chivalry in the way in which they arranged the place for the companion of their doctor.

"The people seem very fond of you," said Alice. "I

did not imagine that the peasantry were so devoted to their physician."

"They are not usually," was Reinsfeld's reply. "They are apt to see in him only a man who costs them money, and they try not to avail themselves of his help. But the relation between the Wolkensteiners and myself is exceptional. We have gone through some hard times together, and they give me credit for not leaving them in the lurch, and for going indiscriminately to every one who needs me, even although the poor wretch have only a 'God bless you!' by way of fee. There is a great deal of poverty among the people, and it is impossible to think only of one's self; at least I have found it so."

"Yes, that I know," Alice interposed, with unusual vivacity. "You did not think of yourself when a better position was offered you. Wolfgang mentioned that during your visit the other day."

As she referred to it Benno coloured slightly: "Do you really remember that remark of his? Yes, Wolf was very much provoked with me at the time, and I suppose he was right. The position was undoubtedly a good one, in a hospital in one of our large cities, and by a lucky chance I was preferred beyond any of my colleagues; but the condition attached was that I should report myself at the election, and enter immediately upon the duties of my office."

"And you had patients here in the village who were very ill at the time?"

"Not only here, but everywhere throughout the district. Diphtheria had broken out, and the children brought home contagion from school. One or two were lying ill in almost every house, and most of the cases were very serious, for the epidemic was particu-

larly virulent,—and just when it was at its height the place was offered me! The nearest physician lived half a day's journey away, and my distinguished colleagues in Heilborn do not come up to the lonely farms through storm and snow,—it would cost the people too dear. I delayed my departure from day to day, and Wolfgang kept urging me, but I *could* not go. Hansel, come here!"

He beckoned to a boy of about six who had worked his way to the front and stood looking on delightedly at the dancers. He was a sturdy little fellow, with flaxen hair and a fresh, chubby face. He obeyed the call instantly, very proud to be summoned by the doctor, and looked up confidently at the young lady to whom he was presented.

"Look at this fellow, Fräulein Nordheim," Reinsfeld went on; "he does not look as if, eight months ago, he lay very nearly dying, does he? He is the grandson of old Seppel, who used to be at Wolkenstein Court, and he has a little sister who was at the point of death also. Those two decided the matter! Just as I had resolved to set out, Sepp came to me on a stormy night; the old man cried bitterly, and the mother, a young peasant-woman, wailed out, 'Do not go, Herr Doctor! If you leave us the boy will die, and the girl too.' I knew better than they did the need in which they stood of medical aid, and there were others too who needed me sorely. This poor little rogue struggled so with the frightful disease, and looked up at me with such beseeching eyes, as if I were absolutely the Almighty,—and I stayed. I could not find it in my heart to leave the poor little things to suffer just that I might feather my own nest. I sent word, to be sure, why I was obliged to delay, but the gentlemen in authority

could not wait, of course; there were many other applicants, and one of them got the position."

"And you?" Alice asked, gently.

"I? Well, Fräulein Nordheim, I never repented it, for I brought most of my little patients through, and since then the Wolkensteiners have been willing to go through fire and water to serve me."

Alice made no rejoinder; she looked up for a moment at the man who related all this so simply and as if it were quite a matter of course that he should relinquish his future, and then she drew little Hansel towards her and gently kissed the boy's rosy cheek. There was something inexpressibly tender in the act, and Benno's eyes sparkled as he was conscious of the silent recognition thus conveyed.

"Well, Benno, are you receiving the homage of the assembled populace?" cried Molly, approaching with her husband; and Gersdorf added, with a laugh,—

"Yes, it was really a triumphal procession that escorted Fräulein Nordheim and yourself to the dancing-floor. Pray allow us some share of your popularity."

Waltenberg and Erna soon joined them, and the entire party made themselves comfortable in a corner of the dancing-floor. Poor Frau von Lasberg little dreamed what were the consequences of her headache. Alice, her charge, who had been so carefully shielded from every noise, from all undesirable association,—Alice was sitting close beside the ear-splitting music of the rural orchestra, in the midst of the shouts and whoops of the dancers, whose nail-shod soles stamped out the time amid the whirling dust, and, strange to say, she was extremely well entertained. There was a faint flush on her pale cheek, her eyes had lost their weary expression and beamed with pleasure, and Benno

Reinsfeld was standing beside her chair, prouder and happier than he had ever been in his life before, conducting himself like the very pink of courtesy. Verily, it was a day of signs and wonders!

The doctor's popularity, however, had its drawbacks, as was soon to appear. Little Hansel had been summoned by his mother with an air of mystery from the dancing-floor to be intrusted with an important mission. Old Sepp had brought from the Nordheim villa the intelligence that Fräulein von Thurgau and the foreign gentleman from Heilborn were either already betrothed or were going to be, and that they were only waiting for the president's return to have their betrothal publicly announced. The young peasant-woman, Seppel's daughter, who had also been a servant at Wolkenstein Court until her marriage, and still cherished a loyal allegiance to its former mistress, was quite beside herself with joy at sight of her beloved Fräulein, to whom she proudly presented her two children. Hansel was now to repeat the St. John's verse to the betrothed pair, and, accompanied by his sister, to present to them the bunch of flowers which obliged those receiving it to dance together. The Fräulein knew the old custom and would be delighted to comply with it with her 'schatz.' From the fresh bouquet of Alpine flowers which decorated the inn parlour the finest were selected, and a rehearsal hurriedly took place, in which Hansel had sustained with great credit the part which he was now to play in public.

There was a pause in the dancing, and the music was silent as Hansel again made his appearance on the floor, one hand full of Alpine flowers, while with the other he led along his little sister, who carried a

nosegay equally large. With much gravity he advanced, as he had been instructed to do, towards the group of ladies and gentlemen; but the directions given him could not have been sufficiently clear, for the two children marched straight up to Alice and the doctor, and offered them the flowers, while Hansel began to recite his verse.

"Gracious, Hansel, those are not the right ones!" his mother cried in a loud whisper, but Hansel was not to be deterred. For him there was but one 'right one,' and that was the Herr Doctor, with the young lady beside him. So he went bravely through his verse, and ended with emphasis,—

"Do not refuse it,—
Our offering of flowers,
And midsummer's blessings
Fall on you in showers."

Alice, surprised, graciously accepted the bouquet which the little girl held out to her, but Benno, who understood the significance of the little comedy, was overwhelmed with embarrassment.

"But, my boy,—my little girl, what are you thinking of?" he exclaimed, trying to turn the children aside. Hansel, however, stood his ground sturdily and thrust his nosegay into the doctor's hand.

"Ah, take his flowers," Alice said, in entire unconsciousness. "What does it all mean?"

"It is the ancient St. John's blessing," Erna explained, smiling, "and the flowers mean that you positively must dance with the doctor, Alice; I am afraid there is no help for it."

"Oh, this is delightful!" Molly cried, clapping her hands. "Of course; Benno must dance by all means."

Poor Reinsfeld was in despair, but Waltenberg and Gersdorf laughingly insisted, and even Erna, who probably guessed, from the young peasant-wife's face, the state of the case, entered into the jest. "You need only go once round the floor, Alice," she said. "Comply with the old custom; you will offend the people if you refuse their doctor, of whom they think so much, the dance to which, in their opinion, he has a right. It would be to reject the midsummer blessing which they so kindly invoke for you."

Alice did not seem for her part to think the custom a very strange one; she merely smiled on perceiving the young physician's intense embarrassment, and, turning to him, said, in an undertone,—

"We must comply with their wish, Herr Doctor; do you not think so?"

Poor Benno, who had never danced save at these rural festivals, fairly grew giddy at these words.

"Fräulein Nordheim—would you——?" he asked.

In reply Alice arose and took his arm. Those standing about, who thought it all a matter of course, made room, the music struck up, and in another moment the couple were whirling away.

Meanwhile, Frau von Lasberg was feeling much better,—the cool quiet of the secluded apartment had really done her good; she came rustling in great majesty to the door of the inn, where, to her intense annoyance, she found her egress barred by a crowd of people, among whom were Gronau with Said and Djelma, and the host and hostess. All were stretching their necks to gaze towards the dancing-floor, which could be seen very easily from the top of the inn steps, and where something remarkable seemed to be going on.

The Baroness was naturally of too refined a nature to share in such vulgar curiosity, and she was annoyed that no one seemed to perceive her; she turned to Said, who stood near her, and said, authoritatively, "Said, stand aside; are the ladies still in the garden?"

"No; on the dancing-floor," Said replied, delighted.

Frau von Lasberg was indignant; she suspected some folly of Molly's, that *enfant terrible*: "And they have left Fräulein Nordheim alone?"

"No; the Fräulein is dancing with the doctor!" Said explained, showing his white teeth in a grin.

The Baroness shrugged her shoulders at the stupidity of the negro, with his broken German; but, involuntarily looking in the direction whither he pointed, she saw what almost paralyzed her,—the doctor's athletic figure with its arm about the waist of a young lady in a light summer-gown and a straw hat trimmed with flowers,—her pupil, Alice Nordheim. And they were dancing together! Fräulein Alice Nordheim dancing with the peasant doctor!

It was more than Frau von Lasberg's overtaxed nerves could endure. She very nearly fainted, and would have fallen had not Said received her in his arms, as was of course his duty; but in great embarrassment as to what was to be done with his burden, he called out, "Herr Gronau! Herr Gronau! I have got a lady!"

"Well, you had better keep her, then," said Veit, who, quite unaware of what was going on, stood at some distance and did not even turn his head. The host and hostess, however, heard the distressed exclamation and hurried to the rescue. There was a vast stir and commotion, and Djelma was running off to

the dancing-floor, when Gronau detained him: "Stop! Where are you going?"

"To bring the doctor." But Veit held him fast.

"Stay where you are!" Veit ordered. "Is the poor doctor never to have any pleasure? Let him have his dance out, and then he can restore the Frau Baroness."

The crowd about the dancing-floor were quite unconscious of this episode, and the couple danced on. Benno's arm encircled the delicate waist, and his eyes rested with delight upon the lovely face, no longer pale, but tinged by the exercise a rosy pink, that was raised to his own, and as he gazed he forgot Oberstein and the entire world. Oberstein, however, was hugely delighted with the turn affairs had taken, and testified to its pleasure in unmistakable fashion: the musicians fiddled away with enthusiasm, the peasant lads and lasses shouted, Hansel and his little sister skipped about, keeping time to the waltz, and all the Wolkensteiners sang in chorus,—

"Do not refuse it,—
Our offering of flowers,
And midsummer's blessings
Fall on you in showers."

CHAPTER XV.

A BETROTHAL.

NEARLY four weeks had gone by, and July was approaching its close, when President Nordheim returned to his mountain-villa. Meanwhile, the engineer-in-chief, whose ill health had long necessitated

his resigning his position into Elmhorst's hands in all save the name, had died, and there had been but one opinion as to the man who should succeed him; the future son-in-law of the president, the engineer of the Wolkenstein bridge, was unanimously chosen to fill the vacant post. He was thus at the head of the huge undertaking now so near its completion.

Several hours after Nordheim's return he retired with Wolfgang to his study, there to discuss the matter, which they had not done hitherto save by letter. Both were well content.

"Your election was a mere form," said the president. "There was no name save yours mentioned; nevertheless I congratulate you, Herr Engineer-in-Chief."

Elmhorst smiled slightly, but with none of that proud self-consciousness with which he had formerly achieved his appointment as superintendent, and yet that had been only the starting-point of the career the goal of which was now attained so brilliantly. A change had taken place in him: he looked pale and depressed, and in the keen eyes, whose depths had seemed so cold, there glowed from time to time a fire which leaped to light, only to flicker unsteadily and then to be as quickly extinguished. In conversation, too, he no longer preserved his old deliberate composure; in spite of all his self-control the man seemed to be consumed by some inward struggle, which did not permit him to march forward to gratify his ambition without looking either to the right or to the left,—some racking, tormenting struggle barred his path.

"Thank you, sir," he replied. "I value highly the proof thus given me of the confidence reposed in me, and I confess, besides, that I take satisfaction in knowing that the completion of the work to which I have

given the best that is in me should be connected with my name."

"Do you set such a value on that?" Nordheim asked, indifferently. "True, such an ambition is still natural at your age; but you will soon outgrow it when loftier interests come to the fore."

"Loftier than the honour that attaches to the creation of a great work?"

"More practical interests, I mean,—interests of more decisive weight,—and it is precisely of them that I wish to speak with you. You know that I have long cherished the desire to retire from the company as soon as the railway shall be opened?"

"I do; you mentioned it to me some months ago, and surprised me exceedingly. Why should you wish to retire from an undertaking which you practically called into existence?"

"Because it no longer seems to me sufficiently profitable," the president replied, coolly. "The costs of construction are very heavy,—much heavier than I thought; in fact, there was no possibility of foreseeing all the difficulties in our way, and then your predecessor had such a mania for building with solidity. He sometimes drove me to despair with that solidity of his; it was terribly costly."

"Excuse me, sir, but I share that same 'mania,'" Wolfgang declared, with some emphasis.

"Of course. Hitherto you have been simply an engineer of the railway, and it could make but little difference to you if it cost a few millions more or less. But when in future you engage in such undertakings as my son-in-law you will think very differently."

"On such points—never!"

"Oh, you must learn to do so. In this case we can

specially emphasize the admirable quality of the structure when the appraisement is made, which will probably be this year. The stockholders must own the railway; I have resolved upon that, and have already taken steps to have it so arranged. My shares stand for millions where others have invested tens of thousands at the most; I can consider myself the practical proprietor of the entire concern. Consequently I can impose my own conditions, and therefore I am especially glad to have you at the head of affairs as engineer-in-chief; we need take no stranger into counsel, but can work together."

"I am entirely at your service, sir, as you know; as matters stand, the appraisement will be tolerably high."

"I hope so," Nordheim said, slowly and significantly. "Moreover, the calculations are for the most part already made. They should be ready long beforehand, and they demand the work of a thorough man of business. I could not, therefore, call upon you to make them; you have enough to do in the conduct of the technical part of the enterprise. You will merely be called upon to review and approve the appraisement, and in this regard I rely upon you absolutely, Wolfgang. The unbounded confidence which you enjoy, as the result of your labours hitherto, will make matters very easy for us."

Wolfgang looked somewhat puzzled; it was a matter of course that he should do his duty and assist his father-in-law to the best of his ability, but there seemed some other meaning hidden behind the president's words: they sounded odd. There was no opportunity for further explanation, however, for Nordheim looked at his watch and arose.

"Four o'clock already; it will soon be dinner-time. Come, Wolfgang, we must not keep the ladies waiting."

"You brought Waltenberg with you," Elmhorst said, as he also rose.

"Yes; he met me in Heilborn, and came over with me. His patience seems to have been put to a hard test in these last four weeks. I cannot understand the man. He is proud and self-willed, even arrogant in a certain way, and yet he allows himself to be the victim of a girl's caprice. I mean to have a serious talk with my niece. The matter must be decided."

Meanwhile, they had passed through the adjoining room and entered the drawing-room, where a servant was employed in raising the curtains, which had been drawn down on account of the sun. Nordheim asked if the ladies were in the garden.

"Only the Baroness Thurgau and Herr Waltenberg," was the reply. "Fräulein Nordheim is in her room, where the Herr Doctor is paying her a visit."

"Ah, the new physician whom you have discovered," said the president, turning to Wolfgang. "One of your early friends, I think you told me. He certainly seems to understand the matter, for Alice has changed greatly for the better in a short time. I was quite surprised by her appearance and her unusual sprightliness; the doctor seems to have worked wonders. What is the name of this Oberstein Æsculapius? You forgot to mention it in your letters."

Wolfgang had purposely avoided doing so, but he felt no longer called upon to pay any regard to what he considered as his friend's whim, and he replied, quietly,—

"Dr. Benno Reinsfeld."

Nordheim turned upon him hastily: "Whom did you say?"

"Benno Reinsfeld," Elmhorst repeated, amazed at the tone in which the question was put. He had supposed that the president would scarcely remember the name, and that he would not take the slightest interest in the old associations so foreign now to the millionaire. That they had a deep and lasting hold upon him was evident, however: Nordheim's face grew ghastly pale, and expressed dismay, and even terror, which also showed itself in his voice as he exclaimed, "What! that man in Oberstein,—and in my house?"

Wolfgang was about to reply, but at that moment the door opened and Benno himself entered. He started slightly upon perceiving the president, but paused calmly and bowed. He had just heard from Alice of her father's arrival, and was prepared for this encounter.

Nordheim immediately divined who the man was; perhaps he remembered the young physician whom he had seen for a moment three years before at Wolkenstein Court, without hearing his name, and he was man of the world enough to recover himself immediately. With apparent composure he greeted the young man whom Wolfgang now presented to him, but his impassible features were still ghastly pale.

"Herr Elmhorst wrote me that he had availed himself of your skill on behalf of his betrothed," he said, with frigid courtesy, "and I must express my thanks to you, Herr Doctor, for your efforts seem to have achieved very favourable results; my daughter looks decidedly better. Your diagnosis, I hear, differs from that of her former physicians?"

"Fräulein Nordheim seems to me to be suffering from

a derangement of the nerves," said Benno, modestly, "and I have treated her accordingly."

"Indeed? The other gentlemen were tolerably well agreed in pronouncing her heart affected."

"I know it, but I do not agree with them, and the result of my treatment seems to prove me in the right. I have induced Fräulein Nordheim, who has been hitherto forbidden all exercise, to take walks and to increase their extent daily, and I have advised some mountain-climbing, and that she should spend as much time as possible in the open air, since this high atmosphere seems to suit her extremely well. Thus far I have cause to be satisfied with her improvement."

"As we all have," the president assented, gazing meanwhile at the young physician as if to read his soul. "As I said, I am grateful to you. You live in Oberstein, Wolfgang wrote me. Have you been there long?"

"Five years, Herr President."

"And you intend to remain?"

"At least until some better position offers."

"There should be no difficulty about that," Nordheim remarked, and then went on to converse with the young man, but with a degree of distant courtesy that entirely precluded familiar ease. Not a word, not a look betrayed any consciousness that the man before him was the son of his early friend; in spite of his apparent kindness, his reserve was also apparent.

Benno perceived this clearly, but was not at all surprised by it, for he had expected nothing else. He knew that the memories roused by his name were far from agreeable to the president, and in his modesty he never dreamed that the result of his medical treatment of the daughter could influence the father. He never

thought of recalling associations so entirely ignored by the millionaire, and, as the meeting was an annoying one for him, he took his leave as soon as possible.

Nordheim looked after him in silence for a few moments, and then, turning to Wolfgang with a frown, he asked, sharply, "How came you to make this acquaintance?"

"As I have told you, Reinsfeld is one of my early friends, whom I met again here in Oberstein."

"And you have known him for years without ever mentioning his name to me?"

"I avoided doing so by Benno's express desire, for your name is as well known to him as his to you. You do not wish to be reminded that his father was your fellow-student,—I perceived that to-day."

"What do you know about it?" the president asked, angrily. "Did the doctor speak to you about it?"

"He did, and informed me that the former friendship had ended in entire alienation."

Nordheim leaned his hand as if accidentally upon the back of the chair by which he was standing; his face had grown pale again, and his voice was rather tremulous as he asked, "Indeed! And what does he know about it?"

"Nothing at all! He was a boy at the time, and never learned what caused the breach; but he was much too proud to approach you in any way, and therefore made me promise to avoid mentioning his name for as long as I could."

Involuntarily Nordheim breathed a deep sigh; he made no rejoinder, but walked to the window.

"It seems to me that Dr. Reinsfeld was entitled to a more cordial reception," Wolfgang began again, evidently hurt by the cool way in which his friend had

been treated. "Of course I know nothing of what occurred formerly——"

"Nor do I wish you to know," the president sharply interrupted him. "The affair was of a purely personal character, and one of which I alone can judge; but you knew that this Reinsfeld could not be agreeable to me, and I cannot understand how you came to introduce him into my house and intrust my daughter's health to him. It was an act of supererogation which I cannot approve."

He was evidently much irritated by his encounter with Benno, and was wreaking his irritation upon his future son-in-law, who was, however, nowise inclined to submit to be addressed in a tone which he heard to-day for the first time.

"I regret, sir, that the matter should annoy you," he said, coldly, "but there is no question here of supererogation. It is certainly my right to call in for my betrothed a physician in whom I have perfect confidence, and who, as you yourself must admit, has entirely justified my confidence. I could not possibly surmise that an old grudge, dating twenty years back, and of which Benno is as innocent as he is ignorant, could make you so unjust. Your former friend is long since dead, and all unpleasantness should be buried with him."

"I am the only judge of that," Nordheim interrupted him, with a fresh access of anger. "Enough. I will not have this man coming to my house. I will send him a fee,—of course a very large fee,—and decline further visits from him upon any pretext whatsoever. And I also request you to discontinue your intercourse with him. I do not approve of it."

The words sounded like a command, but the young engineer-in-chief was not the man to submit. His

eyes flashed: "I think I have told you, sir, that Dr. Reinsfeld is my friend," he said, sternly, "and of course there can be no question of giving him up. It would insult him, after the pains he has taken with Alice's health, to dismiss him with a fee before her cure is complete. And I must beg you also to adopt another tone in speaking of him. Benno is a man deserving of the greatest regard; beneath an unpretending and even awkward exterior he possesses characteristics and talents worthy of all admiration."

"Indeed?" The president laughed scornfully. "I am learning to know you to-day, Wolfgang, in an entirely new character,—that of an enthusiastic and self-sacrificing friend. I should hardly have thought it of you."

"I am at least wont to stand up for my friends, and not to leave them in the lurch," was the very decided reply.

"But I repeat that I do not choose to have this man in my house," Nordheim said, dictatorially. "I suppose I am master here."

"Certainly; but in *my* future house Benno will always be a welcome guest, and I shall explain this to him unreservedly, in case I should be obliged by your dismissal of him to discuss the matter with him, and to—excuse you."

The words left nothing to be desired in the way of emphasis. It was the first time that there had been a difference of opinion between the two men; hitherto their views and interests had been identical. Wolfgang showed in this first encounter that he was no docile son-in-law, but could maintain his ground with entire resolution. He certainly would not yield, as the president could clearly see; and probably Nordheim had

some reason for not pushing him to extremities, for he lowered his tone.

"The matter is not worth a dispute," he said, with a shrug. "What, in fact, is this Dr. Reinsfeld to me? I would rather not be reminded by the sight of him of a disagreeable circumstance,—nothing more. In spite of your enthusiastic eulogy, I take the liberty of finding him as insignificant as was the incident that caused me to break with his father. Let the matter drop, for all I care."

He could not have astounded Wolfgang more than by this unwonted acquiescence. This indifference was in direct contrast with his former feverish irritability. The young man was silent and appeared satisfied, but the ancient grudge had acquired a new significance in his eyes. He was now convinced that the cause of it had not been insignificant; a man like Nordheim would not have preserved for twenty years the memory of a mere bagatelle.

Alice here made her appearance, to the evident relief of her father, who made no reference to the physician's visit, but began to talk of other things, and Wolfgang also took pains to conceal his annoyance. Alice did not perceive anything amiss; she was on her way to the garden to look for Erna, and her father, as well as her betrothed, joined her.

The garden of the villa was scarcely in accord with its elevated situation, where the usual flowers and ornamental shrubs enjoyed but a short summer, and were buried beneath the snow during more than half the year. The beds that had been laid out on the former meadow were fresh and sunny, but the little pine forest adjoining the garden, and extending to the foot of the cliffs, offered a cool, shady retreat from the hot sun.

It formed a kind of natural park, to which the moss-grown rocks, detached from their mountain-home in some ancient avalanche, and lying scattered here and there, lent a romantic charm.

Upon a rustic seat at the base of one of these rocks sat the Baroness Thurgau, and before her stood Ernst Waltenberg, but not engaged in calm conversation; he had sprung up and planted himself before her as if to prevent her escape. He was greatly agitated. "No, no, Fräulein Thurgau, you must stay and hear me!" he exclaimed. "You have repeatedly escaped me of late when I would fain have uttered what has been upon my lips for months. Stay, I entreat! I can endure suspense no longer."

Erna could not but be conscious that he had a right to be heard. She made no further attempt to leave him, but the expression of her face betrayed her dread of the coming declaration. Neither by word nor by look did she give the slightest encouragement to the man who now continued, with ever-increasing ardour,—

"I might have ended this uncertainty long ago, but, for the first time in my life, I have been and am a very coward. You cannot dream, Erna, of the misery you have caused me by your reserve, and avoidance of me! When I would have spoken I seemed to read in your eyes a 'no,' and that I could not endure."

"Herr Waltenberg, listen to me," the girl said, gently.

"*Herr* Waltenberg!" he repeated, bitterly. "Have you no other name for me? Am I still such a stranger to you that you cannot, for once at least, let me hear you call me Ernst? You must have long known that I love you with all a man's passion,—that I sue for you as for the greatest of all blessings. There was a time when entire freedom was my highest ideal of happi-

ness; when I shrank from the thought of any tie that could fetter me. All that is gone and forgotten. What is all the world to me—what is unfettered freedom—without you? On this broad earth I care for you, and for you only!”

He had taken her hand, and she did not withdraw it from his clasp, but it lay there cold and passive, and when she raised her eyes to his they were veiled with sadness.

“I know that you love me, Ernst,” she said, slowly, “and I believe in the depth and sincerity of your affection, but I can give you no love in return.”

He dropped her hand suddenly: “And why not?”

“A strange question to ask. Can love be forced?”

“Ah, yes. A man’s boundless, passionate devotion must beget love in return—if there is no rival in the way.”

Erna shivered, and the colour mounted slowly in her face, but she was silent. This change of colour did not escape Waltenberg, who was gazing at her with breathless eagerness. His dark face grew pale on a sudden, and there was something like a menace in the tone in which he said, “Erna, why have you avoided me hitherto? Why do you refuse to return my love? Tell me the truth at all hazards. Do you love another?”

A short pause ensued. Erna would fain have refused to reply. How could she confess to another that which she shrank from acknowledging even to herself? But a glance into the agitated face of the man before her decided her.

“I will be entirely frank with you,” she said, firmly. “I have loved. It was a dream, followed by a bitter wakening.”

"Then the man was unworthy of you?"

"He was unworthy of any pure and great affection, and when I learned this, I tore my love for him from my heart. I pray you, do not question me further. It is gone and buried."

"Ah, he is dead, then?"

There was a degree of savage triumph in the question, and still more cruel was the hatred that flashed in his eyes,—hatred for one whom he thought dead. Erna saw it, and for an instant a wave of terror overwhelmed her. Instinctively she bowed her head as before a threatened danger, and before she was conscious that by this gesture she confirmed him in his error the involuntary falsehood was told.

Ernst drew a deep breath, and the colour slowly returned to his cheek: "Well, then, it is with the dead that I must strive. I will not fear a phantom; it must yield when once I clasp you in my arms. Erna, come to me!"

She recoiled in dismay from the passion in his words: "What! you still persist? When I tell you that I have no love to bestow upon you, does not your pride stand you in stead?"

"My pride,—where has it gone?" he broke forth. "Do you suppose that I could have gone on wooing you patiently for months without one word of encouragement from you, had I been the same Waltenberg who thought he needed but to ask of fate to attain his desire? Now I have learned to beg. The sight of you threw about me a spell to escape from which I struggle in vain. Erna, if you desire it I will resign my wandering life, and if you should wish for home in those sunny lands which I so long to show you, I will return with you to the cold, gloomy north, and

for your sake assume the fetters of existence here. You do not know what a change you have already wrought in me, how all-powerful is your influence over me. Ah, do not be thus cold and impassive as your Alpine Fay upon her icy throne! I must win you for my own although your kiss were as deadly as that of the phantom of your legend."

His words were prompted by passion, strong to sweep down all obstacles in its path; such tones are always intoxicating for a woman's ear, and here, moreover, they dropped like soothing balm upon a wound that was still bleeding. It had been so humiliating to the girl to know herself ignored, resigned, not for the sake of another,—Erna knew well that that other was as nought to the man whose ambition was his god, the idol to whom she had been sacrificed. And now she was beloved, idolized, encompassed by a passionate regard which knew no calculation and no bounds. She was desired for herself alone. It was a triumph for her pride. And she was assailed, too, by pity,—by the consciousness of power to bestow happiness. Everything urged her to utter the consent for which she was implored, and yet she was restrained by an invisible something, and at this decisive moment another face arose in her memory,—a face that had looked so pale in the moonlight as the white lips had faltered, 'And could you have loved a man who had risen thus?'

"Erna, ah, do not keep me upon the rack!" Waltenberg exclaimed, with feverish impatience. "See! I kneel to implore you!" And he threw himself upon his knees before her and pressed her hand to his lips.

As she turned away her eyes as if entreating help, she suddenly started, and in a hurried whisper ex

claimed, "For heaven's sake, rise, Ernst! We are not alone."

He sprang to his feet, and, following the direction of her eyes, perceived the president with his daughter and her betrothed just emerging in the distance from among the trees.

They had all been witnesses of the scene for a few seconds, but Nordheim divined that the decisive word had not been spoken, and that his self-willed niece might thwart his plan at the last moment. He therefore made haste to render its fulfilment irrevocable, and, advancing quickly, exclaimed, with a laugh, "We ask a thousand pardons! Nothing was farther from our intention than to intrude, but, since we have done so, let me offer you my best wishes, my child, and, Waltenberg, I congratulate you from my heart! We are scarcely surprised, having seen for some time how matters stood with you, and upon my arrival I perceived a betrothal in the air. Come, Alice and Wolfgang, congratulate these lovers."

He bestowed a paternal embrace upon his niece, shook Waltenberg warmly by the hand, and so overwhelmed the pair with congratulations and good wishes that no denial on Erna's part was possible. She passively allowed it all,—allowed Alice to embrace her and Ernst to clasp her hand in his as his betrothed, only fully recovering her consciousness when Wolfgang approached her.

"Let me add my good wishes to the rest, Fräulein von Thurgau," he said. His voice was calm, too calm, and his immovable countenance betrayed no breath of the tempest raging within him. Only for one instant did his eye meet hers, and that instant told her that she was amply revenged upon the man who had sacri-

ficed his love to ambition and the love of gold. Now that he saw her in the arms of another, he felt how pitiable had been his choice, felt that he had bartered away the happiness of his life.

CHAPTER XVI.

SUSPICIONS.

"As I say, Wolf, I do not know what to think of it. I never applied for the position. I did not, in fact, know anything about it, and here it is offered to me,—to me in this secluded Oberstein at the other end of the kingdom. There, read for yourself."

As he spoke, Benno Reinsfeld handed his friend a letter which he had received the day before. They were in the doctor's study, and Elmhorst also seemed surprised as he read the letter through attentively.

"It certainly is an admirable position," he said. "Neuenfeld is one of our largest iron-works,—I know the place by name at least, and the working population form a colony there, while you can establish the pleasantest relations with the multitude of officials employed in the management of the factories. Why, your salary will amount to six times your present income. Of course you must accept it. You must not let your good fortune slip again."

"But that other time I took infinite trouble to obtain the position. I sent in a scientific treatise that got me the preference, and then I was dropped, just because I could not come up to time. I have no association with Neuenfeld,—I do not know a soul there,—and

with such advantages to offer there must be at least a dozen applicants for the post. How does the management know of the existence of a Dr. Reinsfeld in Oberstein?"

Wolfgang looked down thoughtfully, then read over the letter again: "I think I can solve the riddle for you," he said at last. "The president has had a hand in it."

"The president? Impossible!"

"On the contrary, very probable. He is interested pecuniarily in the iron-works, and he put the present director there; his influence extends everywhere."

"But he certainly would not exert that influence in my behalf. You yourself saw how coldly he received me on the only occasion when I have had the honour of meeting him."

"Nor do I think that he has been induced to interfere thus for benevolence's sake, but—— Benno, do you really know nothing of the cause of the breach between your father and Nordheim? Can you not remember some expression, some hint, that would give you a clue to it?"

Benno seemed to reflect, and then shook his head: "No, Wolf; no child heeds such things. I only know that afterwards, when I asked after 'Uncle Nordheim,' my father, with a severity very unlike himself, forbade my speaking of him. Soon afterwards my parents died, and in the hard struggle that ensued I had too much to do to allow of my reviving childish memories. But why do you ask?"

"Because I am now convinced that something very serious occurred then, the sting of which is still sharp after twenty years. It caused the only difference I have ever had with Herr Nordheim, who visits his

anger upon you, who are entirely innocent of all offence."

"Possibly; but that would be all the more reason why he should not obtain for me a lucrative position."

"It is just what he would do, were there no other means of removing you from his vicinity, and I fear that this is the true state of the case. He even wished to put a stop to your professional visits to his daughter. I did not tell you of it, because I thought it might, with justice, offend you, and he apparently changed his mind; but I am quite sure that I see his hand in this offer to you, from an entirely unexpected quarter, of a position that will keep you confined to a spot quite as distant from here as from the capital."

"Why, that would be a positive plot," Reinsfeld interposed, incredulously. "Do you really suspect the president of it?"

"Yes," said Elmhorst, coldly. "But, however the case may stand, so advantageous a position is not likely to come in your way soon again: so accept it by all means."

"Even if it be offered to me from such motives?"

"They are only supposititious; and even were they actual, no one in Neuenfeld knows anything of the circumstances; there they merely accept the recommendation of an influential man. Perhaps he perceives the injustice of visiting an old grudge upon you and wishes to indemnify you, since your presence recalls disagreeable memories."

Wolfgang knew well that this could not be so; his talk with the president had convinced him that he could be actuated by no sentiments of justice or magnanimity, but the young engineer wished to make the way easy for his friend, with whose sensitive delicacy

he was familiar. Under all circumstances it was a piece of good fortune for Reinsfeld to be removed from his present obscure position, no matter whose was the influence to which he owed the change.

"We will discuss it this evening when you come to me," Elmhorst continued, taking his hat from the table. "Now I must go; my conveyance is waiting outside: I am driving to the lower railway."

"Wolf," said Benno, with a searching, anxious glance at his friend's face, "did you sleep at all last night?"

"No; I had some work to do. That sometimes will happen."

"Sometimes! It has come to be the rule with you. I believe you hardly sleep at all."

"Not much, it is true, but there is no help for it. Every structure must be finished before the winter sets in. Of course that makes a deal of work, and as engineer-in-chief I must see to it all."

"You are overworking yourself perilously. Hardly any other man could do as you are doing, and you cannot go on thus for long. How often I have told you——"

"The same old story," Wolfgang interrupted him, impatiently. "Let me alone, Benno; there is no help for it."

The doctor had, unfortunately, learned from experience that all his admonitions on this point would avail nothing, and he shook his head anxiously as he escorted his friend to the carriage. He himself was unwearied in the performance of his duties, but he knew nothing of the feverish state of mind that seeks forgetfulness in labour at whatever cost.

In the hall they met Veit Gronau, who had come with Waltenberg from Heilborn, and had taken the

opportunity to pay a visit to Oberstein. The gentlemen bade each other good-day, and then Elmhurst got into his carriage, while the two others returned to the study.

"The Herr Engineer-in-Chief was in a great hurry," said Gronau, settling himself in the leathern arm-chair, the leg of which had, fortunately, been mended. "He scarcely took time to speak to me, and he looks very little like a happy lover. He's always as pale and gloomy as the marble guest! And yet he surely has reason to be contented with his lot."

"Yes, I am anxious about Wolf," Benno declared. "He is not at all like himself, and I am afraid the post he so coveted will be his bane. Even his iron constitution cannot stand the strain of feverish activity which fills his days and nights. He oversees the entire extent of railway, and he never gives himself an instant's rest, in spite of all I can say."

"Yes, he is everywhere except with his betrothed," Gronau remarked, drily. "The lady seems to be of a remarkably unexacting temperament, else she could hardly endure having her lover entirely given over to locomotives, and tunnels, and bridges, or to have him declare as soon as he appears that he has not a moment to stay. But she takes it all as quite a matter of course. 'Tis an odd household, that of the Nordheim villa. With two pair of lovers, one would suppose all would go as merrily as a marriage-bell, but instead of that they all seem rather uncomfortable, not excepting Herr Waltenberg. Said and Djelma are always complaining to me of his temper. I explained to them that it was all because he was thinking of marrying; that matrimony was sure to make mischief; but the rogues persist in thinking it very fine."

"Oh, you are a declared foe to matrimony, as we all know," said Reinsfeld, with a fleeting smile. "If Wolfgang is out of sorts,—and the responsibilities of his position may well make him so,—his betrothed is, in looks and temper, all that could be desired."

"Yes, she is the gayest of all," Gronau assented. "That cure of yours is almost a miracle, Herr Doctor. What a poor, pining little plant she was, and now she is as fresh and blooming as a rose! Baroness Thurgau has grown grave and silent; and as for the two men,—one of them is always at the boiling-point, and is as jealous as a Turk, while the other is a perfect icicle, and they look at each other as if they would like to fly at each other's throats. What affectionate relatives they will be!"

Benno suppressed a sigh; the mute hostility between Wolfgang and Waltenberg, which was barely concealed beneath the forms of conventional courtesy, had not escaped him, but he said nothing.

"I am really sorry for Herr Waltenberg," Veit began again. "He cannot live without a sight of his betrothed every twenty-four hours, and he drives over from Heilborn daily. She, on the contrary, seems to have taken the famous mountain divinity for her model: she sits enthroned like the Alpine Sprite, and allows herself to be worshipped, while she remains entirely unmoved. Absolutely, doctor, you are the only sensible being among them all. You have no thoughts of matrimony,—hold fast to that!"

"I certainly am not thinking of it, but of something else, which will be scarcely less of a surprise to you,—of going away. Very unexpectedly a lucrative position has been offered me."

"Bravo! Accept it at once!"

"I certainly must."

Gronau burst into a laugh: "With what a long face you say that! I verily believe it goes to your heart to leave these honest Obersteiners who have been wearing you out for five years, to requite you with only a 'God reward you!' Just like my dear old Benno! He never would have died a poor man if he had understood the world and human nature. There he sat for years bothering over an idea which ought to have made his fortune, but he never knew how to push his claims, and timid requests and modest applications do no good with great capitalists and lords of finance. Finally others got before him with his invention, which was in the air, as it were, when they began to build mountain-railways, but nevertheless he was the first to devise the system of mountain-locomotives; all the later inventions are based upon his principle."

"My father?" Benno asked, with a puzzled air. "You are mistaken; it is the Nordheim system upon which the locomotives of to-day are constructed."

"I beg pardon: 'tis the Reinsfeld method," Gronau maintained.

"You are mistaken, I assure you. Wolf told me himself that his future father-in-law laid the foundation of his fortunes by the sale of his method of constructing mountain-locomotives. It was purchased and used by the first mountain-railways. Afterwards, of course, all kinds of improvements were added, but the inventor made a goodly profit; they paid him a very large price for the patent."

"Paid whom? Nordheim?" Veit shouted.

"The president,—certainly."

"And the engineer-in-chief told you this?"

"He did; we were talking of it a little while ago."

Moreover, the thing is well known; any engineer can tell you so."

Gronau suddenly sprang up and approached the young physician. "Doctor," he said, slowly and emphatically, "this is either a wretched mistake or a scoundrelly trick!"

"Scoundrelly trick?" Benno repeated, startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, or rather I know, that this invention was your father's, and Nordheim knows it as well as I do. If he has given it out for his own——"

"In heaven's name, you would not call——"

"The highly-respected president a scoundrel? Well, that remains to be seen. It was, of course, possible for a stranger to have hit upon the same invention,—every engineer was occupied with the problem at the time,—but Nordheim had his friend's completed plan in his possession, studied it thoroughly, praised and admired it; there is no possibility of his having happened upon the idea for himself. We must sift the matter. Consider, Benno, do you really know nothing of the cause of the estrangement of which you have told me?"

"Nothing at all. I have just told Wolfgang so; he asked me the same question."

"The engineer-in-chief? What made him do that?"

"He thought he saw the president's hand in the offer that has just been made me, and he surmised—but no, no! Not a word more of such a shameful suspicion. It is impossible."

"Much seems impossible to you, doctor; you have preserved the heart of a——," Veit said, gravely. "But when a man has seen as much of men as I have, he comes to disbelieve in such impossibilities. You

are sure that Nordheim took out a patent for the mountain-locomotive?"

"Certainly; of that fact I am sure."

"Then he is a thief!" Gronau exclaimed, in a burst of indignation,—“a trebly disgraced thief, for he robbed his friend!"

"Hush, hush!" Benno interposed, but fruitlessly: Veit went on to prove his accusation.

"Tell me why your father, who was loyalty itself to his friends, should have broken with the one who was nearest to him? Why did Nordheim, if he were possessed of so inventive a genius, never achieve more than one invention? and why did he entirely abandon engineering shortly afterwards? Can you answer these questions?"

Reinsfeld was silent; under other circumstances he would have rejected all idea of such a suspicion, but the tone of conviction in which the terrible accusation was made, his conversation with Wolfgang, the mystery of the quarrel which had left so bitter a sting behind it that his gentle, amiable father had forbidden the mention of the name of a friend once so dear to him,—all this rushed upon his mind, almost paralyzing his power of thought.

"We must be sure," Gronau said, resolutely. "Where are your father's old papers,—his drawings and sketches? You told me you had preserved them all carefully. There must be something to be found among them, and if not, I will go myself to the president and question him. I am curious to see how he will look. Where are your papers, Benno? Produce them; we have no time to lose."

Benno pointed to a small cabinet in a corner of the room. "You will find there everything that I possess

of my father's," he said, sadly. "Here is the key. Look through it; I——"

"I trust you will help me. You are the interested party. Why do you hesitate?"

The doctor was hesitating, in fact, but Veit had already opened the cabinet, and in a few minutes the rather meagre collection of papers belonging to the late engineer was spread out on the table. His old friend and comrade looked through them with the utmost care; every drawing was closely examined, every leaf turned, but in vain! There was nothing that bore any reference to the matter in question,—no sketch, no note, no memorandum, nothing that could confirm Gronau's suspicions. Benno, who had undertaken the search unwillingly, breathed a sigh of relief, while Veit pushed the papers aside in great dissatisfaction.

"Fools that we are! We might have known it! Nordheim never would have played his rascally trick had anything existed that could betray him. He must have borrowed the plan from his friend upon some pretext and then insured himself against discovery. My old Benno was not the one to unmask such a fox unless he had been in possession of convincing proof of his treachery; and I, the only one cognizant of the truth of the case, was off in the wide world no one knew where. But I am here now, and I will not rest until the affair is brought to light."

"But why?" Benno asked, gently. "Why rake up the old forgotten quarrel? It can do my poor father no good, and should you find the proof you speak of, it would be a terrible blow for—the president's family."

Gronau stared at him for a moment speechless, as

if he could not understand his words; then he burst forth, angrily, "Upon my word this is going too far! Any one else would be almost wild with such a discovery, would move heaven and earth to find out the truth and to brand the guilty, and you would fain restrain me because, forsooth, the engineer-in-chief is your friend,—because you are afraid of troubling the family of your worst enemy. You are the true son of your father; he would have done the very same thing."

He was not quite right in his surmise. Benno had not thought of Wolfgang: a very different face had risen in his mind and gazed at him with brown eyes filled with troubled questionings, but not for worlds would he have revealed what made the confirmation of Gronau's suspicions so terrible to him, and why he would rather bury the whole affair in oblivion.

Veit Gronau turned away, saying, in a tone expressing discontent and pity, "There is nothing to be done with you, Benno. Such unpractical sentimentalists are good for nothing in a matter of this kind. Fortunately, I am on hand. I am now upon the trail, and, cost what it may, I shall pursue it. My old friend shall have in his grave the recognition that was denied him while living!"

CHAPTER XVII.

UNFORESEEN OBSTACLES.

PRESIDENT NORDHEIM was seated in his office in the capital, in consultation with Herr Gersdorf, for the consignment of the railway to the stockholders was now

decided upon. Nordheim's resolve to withdraw from the company after the completion of the undertaking was regretted, but caused no surprise, for the man's restless activity was well known, and it was natural that he should have new schemes wherewith to employ his capital. The glory was his of having devised and executed a bold project which had opened a new highway for the world.

The engineer-in-chief had promised that all building operations should be concluded before the beginning of winter, and as soon as they were finished the transfer was to be made. It would then be the business of the new management to effect the final preparations for the opening of the road, which was to take place the ensuing spring. All this had been settled for months, and Gersdorf, in his capacity of legal representative of the railway company, had had many consultations with the president.

"The engineer-in-chief does in fact achieve almost the impossible," he said, "but yet I cannot understand how he can have all finished by the end of October. The month has begun, and four weeks seems a very short time for the completion of what remains to be done."

"If Wolfgang has said the work shall be done, he will keep his word," Nordheim rejoined, in a tone of calm conviction. "In such cases he spares neither himself nor his subordinates, and in this instance he is also driven by necessity. November brings the snow-storms which are most dangerous in the Wolkenstein district; it is very important to have the work finished."

"Hitherto autumn has brought us only late summer weather," the lawyer observed, as he gathered together

some papers scattered on the table. "I cannot wonder that your daughter lingers in the mountains and seems to have no idea of returning."

"She, with Frau von Lasberg, will probably remain there for some weeks yet. The mountain-air has worked miracles for Alice; she is almost entirely well, and Dr. Reinsfeld advises her to extend her stay until the weather changes. I owe a debt of gratitude to your cousin, and I greatly regret that he is to leave Oberstein. I hear he has another medical position in prospect in—what is the name of the place?"

"Neuenfeld."

"Right,—Neuenfeld. The name had escaped me. I cannot wonder at the young physician for desiring a wider sphere of action; but, as I said, we all regret that he is going so far away. Wolfgang in especial will miss him much.

The words sounded kindly, as though the president were really grateful to his daughter's physician and regretted losing him. Gersdorf, who had no reason to suspect his sincerity, was quite impressed.

"Benno writes me that he shall not leave for his new post before the end of a couple of weeks," he said. "He stipulated for this delay that he might install his successor at Oberstein. Therefore we shall have an opportunity of seeing each other again, for I must go to Heilborn next week. The suit of the parishes of Oberstein and Unterstein against the railway for damage done to their forests in its construction is to be decided, and I represent the company of course."

"Then we shall meet there," said Norlheim. "I am going to take a short holiday, and then return to town with my family. I have been overweighted with business of late, and am sadly in need of rest. I shall

hope to see you at our villa; you will not forget to come?"

"Certainly not," said Gersdorf, rising to take leave.

When he had gone the president rang for lights, for it was growing dark, and then, seating himself at his writing-table, he became absorbed in the papers lying there,—they must have been of a very important nature, for he examined them with the greatest care, his face expressing intense satisfaction as he did so, until it finally broke into a smile.

"Everything arranged," he murmured. "It will be a brilliant transaction. The figures are rather boldly combined, it is true, but they will do their duty, and as soon as Wolfgang has approved them, and affixed his name to the entire estimate, it will be accepted without demur. And that man Reinsfeld is fortunately disposed of. I thought he could not refuse the bait of such a position. Neuenfeld is far enough away, and he can live there comfortably to the end of his days. —What is it? I do not wish to be disturbed again this evening."

The last words were spoken to a servant who entered at the moment, and who now announced, "Herr Elmhurst has arrived."

"The engineer-in-chief?" Nordheim asked, surprised.

"Arrived a moment ago, Herr President."

Nordheim rose quickly, and was about to go to meet the new-comer, but Wolfgang appeared at that moment on the threshold in his travelling-dress.

"Have I startled you, sir, by my unexpected arrival?" he asked.

"Rather; you sent me no telegram," the president replied, motioning to the servant to withdraw. As soon as the door closed behind him he asked, *hastily*,

and evidently disturbed, "What has happened? Anything the matter with the railway?"

"No; I left everything in perfect order."

"And Alice is well, I hope?" This last question was far more composedly put than had been its predecessor.

"Quite well; you have no cause for anxiety."

"Thank heaven! I was afraid something unfortunate had occurred to account for your sudden appearance. What brings you here so unexpectedly?"

"A matter of business, which I could not explain in writing," said Wolfgang, laying aside his hat. "I preferred to see you personally, although I could ill be spared from the railway."

"Well, then, let us talk over your business," replied the president, who was always ready to discuss affairs. "We shall be entirely undisturbed this evening. But first take some rest. I will give orders to have your rooms——"

"Thank you, sir," Elmhorst interrupted him, "but I should like to have the business that has brought me here settled at once; it is urgent,—at least for me. We are quite alone here?"

"We are; I generally insure myself privacy in my own apartments. But for security's sake you can close the door of the next room also."

Wolfgang complied, and then returned. As he advanced into the circle of light from the lamp his face looked pale and agitated. His pallor could hardly be the effect of fatigue from the long, unbroken ride; there was a frown on his brow, and his dark eyes had a stern, almost menacing expression.

"Your business must be important," the president observed, as he sat down, "or you would hardly have

come yourself. Well, then.—But will you not be seated?"

The young man paid no heed to the request, but remained standing, with his hand resting on the back of a chair, as he began, in an apparently calm tone, "You sent me over the estimates and calculations which are to serve as the basis of the transfer of the railway to the stockholders."

"I did. You remember I told you that I would spare you the details of these calculations. You have enough to do in attending to the technical conduct of the work. All you have to do is to look over and approve the estimates, your word as engineer-in-chief being decisive."

"I am aware of that,—entirely aware of my responsibility in the matter, and therefore I wish to put a question to you: Who made these estimates?"

Nordheim glanced in surprise at his future son-in-law; the question evidently astonished him.

"Who? Why, my clerks and those who understand such matters."

"That is not what I mean, sir. They simply made up the figures from the memoranda and calculations furnished them. What I want to know is, whose were those memoranda?—who put down the sums which are the basis of the estimates? It cannot possibly have been yourself."

"Indeed? And why not, may I ask?"

"Because all the accounts are falsified!" Wolfgang said, coldly but very decidedly.

"Falsified? What do you mean?"

"Is it possible that it escaped you?" Elmhurst asked, never taking his eyes from the president. "I discovered it at a glance. All the buildings are estimated at

almost double the cost of their erection, and stations are brought into the calculations which do not exist. The obstacles and catastrophes that impeded us are reckoned up in an incredible fashion, as causing an outlay of hundreds of thousands where not half the amount was expended. In short, the whole sum exceeds by some millions the actual cost of the undertaking."

Nordheim listened in silence, but with a frown, to this agitated explanation, by which, however, he seemed more surprised than offended; at last he said, coldly, "Wolfgang, I really do not understand you."

"Nor did I understand your letter requiring me to approve and sign that estimate. I thought, and I still think, that there is some mistake, and I wanted to ask you personally about it. I trust you can explain it to me."

The president shrugged his shoulders, but maintained the same cool, composed tone, as he replied, "You are a capital engineer, Wolfgang, but that you have no talent for business is quite clear. I hoped we should understand each other in this matter without many words, but, since that does not seem to be the case, we must come to an explanation. Do you suppose that I intend to withdraw from this undertaking with loss?"

"With loss? In any case you receive back your capital with interest."

"A transaction that brings in no more than that is to be reckoned as a losing one," said Nordheim. "I did not imagine you such a novice in business matters as to require to be told this. We have here a chance to make a profit,—a considerable profit. The railway, in fact, belongs to me. I called it into existence, my

capital has been principally expended in its construction, the entire risk has been mine. I venture to think that you will not dispute my right to dispose of my property at any price I think fit."

"If that price is to be gained only by the means you have adopted, I do most decidedly dispute the right you speak of. Should the company receive the railway under such conditions, its bankruptcy will be certain. Even if the road be employed to the fullest extent it cannot bring in a sufficient income to indemnify it approximately for the amount of loss sustained; the entire enterprise must either go to ruin, or fall into the hands of some unprincipled schemer."

"And how does that concern us?" Nordheim asked, calmly.

"How does it concern us?" Elmhorst broke forth, indignantly. "To have the work which you devised, to which I have devoted my best energies, at the head of which stand our united names, go miserably to ruin or be an instrument in the hands of swindlers? It concerns me deeply, as I trust I shall be able to show you."

The president arose with an impatient wave of his hand: "Pray spare me such bursts of declamation, Wolfgang. They really are out of place in a business discussion."

The young man drew himself up; all emotion vanished from his face, giving place to an expression of cool contempt, and his voice was every whit as cold as the president's own as he replied, "I shall not content myself with mere declamation, as you will find, sir. Let me ask once for all, calmly and briefly, who furnished the figures upon which the estimates you sent me are based?"

"I, myself," was the quiet reply.

"And you expected me to approve them and put my name to them?"

"I expect everything of my future son-in-law," Nordheim declared, with sharp emphasis.

"Then you have misunderstood me. I cannot sign the estimates."

"Wolfgang!" There was an evident menace in Nordheim's tone.

"I will not sign them, I say. I never will lend my name to a falsehood."

"You dare to use such language to me?" the president exclaimed, angrily.

"What other language could be used if I should sanction estimates which I know to be false?" Wolfgang asked, with bitterness. "I am the engineer-in-chief, my word is decisive for the company and for the stockholders, who are utterly ignorant in the matter. The responsibility is mine alone."

"Your word could never be questioned," Nordheim interposed. "I had no idea you were such a martinet. You know nothing of business, or you would see that I, in my position, could not possibly venture what I do were there any danger. The figures are so combined that it is impossible to prove an—error from them, and I have explanations prepared for every emergency. No one can blame either you or myself."

At this assertion a smile of infinite scorn hovered upon Elmhurst's lips: "That was certainly the last thing to occur to me! We do indeed misunderstand each other. You fear discovery, I fear the fraud. In short, I will have nothing to do with a lie, and if I refuse my signature it cannot be told."

The president walked close up to him; he was now

much agitated, and his voice betrayed extreme irritation: "Your expressions are, to say the least, strong. Do you suppose you can dictate to me? Have a care, Wolfgang. You are not yet my son-in-law; the knot is not yet tied which was to link you to me. I can cut it at the last moment, and you are too clever not to know all that you would lose with my daughter's hand."

"That means that you make it a condition?"

"Yes,—your signature! Either that—or——!"

As Nordheim spoke thus explicitly, Wolfgang's eyes were fixed gloomily on the ground. He pondered all the consequences of the president's 'Either that—or——!' he was indeed 'clever enough' to know that millions would be lost to him with his betrothed,—the wealth, the brilliant future for which he had bartered his happiness. The moment had come in which he was required to barter something more, and suddenly memory recalled that hour on the Wolkenstein in the moonlit midsummer night when this moment had been sadly foretold him: 'The price now is your freedom; in future it may perhaps be your honour!'

Nordheim interpreted the young man's silence after his own fashion; he laid his hand on Wolfgang's shoulder, and said, in a gentler tone, "Be reasonable, Elmhorst. We should both lose by a separation, and it is the last thing that I desire; but I can and must require my son-in-law to go hand in hand with me, and to make my interests his own. You give me your signature, and I will go surety for everything else. We will both forget this conversation, and divide the profit, which will make you a wealthy, independent man."

"At the price of my honour!" Wolfgang exclaimed,

in hot indignation. "No, by heaven, it shall never come to that! I ought to have known long ago whither your rule of life, your business principles, would lead, for since my betrothal to your daughter you have thrown off all reserve; but I chose to see and to know nothing, because I was fool enough to imagine that, in spite of it all, I could pursue my own path and do as I chose. Now I see that there is no halting in the downward course, that he who leagues himself with you cannot keep his honour unstained. I have been ambitious and reckless—yes. I reckoned upon our association in this undertaking as you did, and conceded more to it than my conscience could entirely justify, but I never will stoop to deceive. If you believed me ready to be a scoundrel for the sake of your wealth,—if the future of which I have dreamed is to be purchased only at such a price,—let it go. I will have none of it!"

He stood erect, and with flashing eyes hurled his refusal at the president. There was something grand and overwhelming in this stormy outbreak from the man who thus at last threw off all the fetters of petty self-interest which had held him bound so long, whose better nature asserted itself and trampled down the alluring temptation. He knew that he was resigning the wealth which would make him independent of Nordheim's favour; that with it he should be free and unfettered to realize all his golden dreams of the future. There had been an instant of hesitation, and then he thrust the tempter from him and redeemed his honour!

The president stood frowning darkly. He perceived now that he had been mistaken in supposing that he should find in the ambitious young engineer a willing instrument, a nature as unscrupulous as his own, but

he had no mind to break entirely with the son-in-law he had chosen. He would lose most by the separation : in the first place, all the profit which Wolfgang's signature would insure him would be destroyed, and moreover, he said to himself, it would be dangerous to make an enemy of one so thoroughly acquainted with his schemes. It could not be ; a breach must be avoided, at least for the present.

"Let us drop this matter for to-day," he said, slowly. "It is too important, and we are neither of us in a mood to discuss it calmly. I am going to my mountain-villa in a week, and until then you can take the affair into consideration. I will not accept your present hasty decision."

"You will be obliged to accept it at the end of the week," Wolfgang declared. "My answer will be precisely the same then. Let a true estimate be made of the cost of the railway, at its highest valuation, and I will not refuse to give it my sanction. I never will sign my name to the present one. That is my final word. Farewell!"

"You are going back immediately?" Nordheim asked.

"Certainly ; the next express leaves in an hour, and the business that brought me here is concluded. My presence is indispensable at my post."

He bowed and took his leave, not after the familiar fashion of the future son-in-law, but formally, as a stranger, and the president felt the significance of his manner.

When Elmhorst reached the spacious vestibule he found there two servants awaiting him. His rooms had been prepared for him, and the lackeys asked for further orders, but he waved them aside : "Thanks, I

am going directly back again, and shall not use the rooms."

The men looked surprised. This was indeed a hurried visit. Would not Herr Elmhurst have the carriage to drive to the station?

"No; I prefer to walk." As he spoke, Elmhurst once more glanced towards the broad staircase leading to the gorgeous apartments in the upper story, and then he left the house where for more than six months he had been regarded as a son, and upon which he was now turning his back forever.

Outside, the October evening was cold and damp; the skies were starless, the air was full of mist, and a keen blast heralded the approach of winter. Involuntarily Wolfgang drew his travelling-cloak closer about his shoulders, as he strode forward at a rapid pace.

It was over! He was perfectly aware of it, and he also clearly perceived Nordheim's desire to avoid a sudden breach for fear lest the man so lately his confidant should expose him by way of revenge. A contemptuous smile curled the young man's lip. Such a fear was quite superfluous; any such act was entirely beneath him. His thoughts wandered to where they had rarely been of late,—to his betrothed. Alice would not suffer if the betrothal were dissolved. She had accepted his suit without opposition in compliance with her father's wish, and she would bend to his will with the same docility should he sever the tie. There had never been any talk of love between them; neither would be conscious of loss.

Wolfgang drew a deep breath. He was free again, free to choose; he could pursue his proud, lonely path, dependent only upon his own courage and capacity,

but the voice which had roused him from the stupor of egotism and ambition would never again sound in his ears, the lovely face would never again smile upon him. That prize belonged to another, and, whatever he might achieve in the future, his happiness had been bartered away,—lost forever.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MOUNTAIN RAMBLE.

AUTUMN this year had donned the aspect of a late summer. The days, with but few exceptions, were sunny and clear, the air was mild, and the mountains stood revealed in all their rarest beauty.

The inmates of the Nordheim villa had prolonged their stay, which had been at first arranged for only the summer months, into October. They had been induced to do this, first out of consideration for Alice's health, and then in accordance with Erna's wish to spend as long a time as was possible among her beloved mountains. Since she had been betrothed to Waltenberg her position in the household had undergone a change; Frau von Lasberg no longer permitted herself to find fault with her, and the president was always ready to forestall his niece's wishes. Waltenberg himself, who disliked a city life with its conventionalities and restraints, was glad to be rid of it, and the Baroness alone sighed about the 'endless exile,' and comforted herself with the prospect of a winter more than usually gay. Now that Erna was also betrothed and that Elmhurst would be in the capital during the

winter months, after his labours as engineer among the mountains were at an end, the Nordheim mansion would surely justify its reputation. There would doubtless be a series of entertainments in honour of the young couples, and Frau von Lasberg revelled in the contemplation of the prominent part it would be hers to play.

Erna and Alice were sitting on the veranda of the villa, and the gay chatter heard thence absolutely came from the lips of Alice Nordheim. There was not a vestige of the air of indifference with which she used to speak formerly. The change that had taken place in her bordered on the miraculous: the sickly pallor the weary movements, the fatigued, unsympathetic expression, had all vanished; the cheeks were rosy, the eyes bright. Whether it were owing to the mountain-air which blew here so pure and fresh, or to the treatment of the young physician, the fact was that in a few months the girl had blossomed forth like some flower which, fading and sickly in the shade, expands into tender beauty in the clear, warm sunshine.

"I wonder where Herr Waltenberg is?" she was just saying. "He is usually here before this time."

"Ernst wrote me that he should be rather late to-day, since he meant to bring us a surprise from Heilborn," Erna replied. She was seated at her drawing, from which she did not look up, nor did she evince the slightest interest in the promised surprise.

"'Tis strange that he should write to you so often, when he sees you every day," remarked Alice, who was quite unused to such attentions from her own lover. "And then he fairly overwhelms you with flowers, for which, it seems to me, you are not half grateful enough."

"I am afraid that is Ernst's own fault," was the quiet reply. "He spoils me, and I am too ready to be spoiled."

"Yes, there is something exaggerated in his manner of wooing," Alice interposed. "His love seems to me like a fire, which burns rather than illumines."

"His is an unusual nature," said Erna. "He must not be judged by the standard we apply to others. Believe me, Alice, much, nay, everything, can be endured in the consciousness that one is supremely and ardently beloved."

She laid down her pencil and looked dreamily abroad into space. It sounded odd, the word 'endured,' and its significance was not softened by so much as the shadow of a smile. Indeed, the expression of gravity was deepened in the young girl's face, and in her eyes there was an indescribable something which assuredly was not happiness.

In the short pause that ensued, the noise of carriage-wheels became audible, and some vehicle drew up in front of the house. Erna shivered slightly; she knew who was at hand, although from where she sat the road could not be seen. She slowly closed her sketch-book and arose, but before she could leave the veranda, a young creature came flying out of the drawing-room and clasped her in an enthusiastic embrace, after which she turned just as eagerly to Alice.

"Why, Molly, is this you?" both girls exclaimed, in a breath.

It was in fact Frau Gersdorf, rosy, merry, and saucy as ever, and behind her appeared Ernst Waltenberg, evidently delighted with the success of his surprise.

"Yes, it is really I," the new-comer began. "Albert

had a tiresome, never-ending suit to attend to in Heilborn, and of course I came with him. The poor fellow's hard work must be made as tolerable as possible for him, so I always go with him upon these expeditions. I verily believe that if he should take it into his head to climb Mount Blanc, or the Himalayas, I should scramble up after him. Thank God, there are no cases to try up there, so there is no chance of his undertaking the ascents. And how are you all here? You have absolutely vanished from the capital. But there's no need to ask; Alice looks fresh as a rose, and Erna is planning her wedding-tour, I hear. Where is it to be? To the South Sea or the North Pole? I should advise the South Sea,—the climate is milder."

She paused to take breath, and without waiting for a reply threw herself into an arm-chair and declared that she was too tired to say a single word.

After the first exchange of greetings Ernst approached his betrothed and handed her a bouquet of costly foreign flowers, rich in colour and exhaling an overpowering fragrance.

"Did I not keep my promise?" he said, pointing to Molly. "I planned this surprise with Albert yesterday afternoon, knowing I should surely be welcome so accompanied."

"But that you always are," said Erna, taking the flowers from him with thanks.

"Always?" he repeated. "Really always? Some times I doubt it."

"Do not say that, Ernst."

His eyes, filled with a passionate entreaty, met her reproachful glance, as together they walked down the veranda steps into the garden. "Are you a little glad when I come?" he went on, in a low tone. "I some-

times imagine you dread my approach and shrink from my embrace, and more than once I have fancied I could detect a sigh of relief when I left you."

"Yes, you watch every look of mine, every breath that I draw, and convert it all into pain, both for yourself and for me," Erna said, gravely. "Your passionate surveillance torments me; how will it be when we are married?"

"Ah, then I shall be calm," he said, with a sigh. "Then I shall know you for my own, my very own; no other will have any right to intrude between us, and then perhaps I may teach you to love me; hitherto I have tried in vain. That you can love I know. You loved—him!"

She hastily withdrew the hand she had left in his: "Ernst, you promised me——"

"Not to speak of that. Yes, I promised, but I did not know how hard it is to fight against a memory, to war with a mere phantom. Would that it were flesh and blood, that I might battle with it to the death!"

His eyes flashed with the mortal hatred that had gleamed in them when he had learned that Erna had loved another. She turned pale, as she laid her hand soothingly upon his arm.

"Ernst," she said, gently, "why torment yourself thus perpetually? You suffer terribly; I see it, and bitterly do I repent my confession. Have I no power to make you calmer and happier?"

Her tone disarmed him at once; he took her hand, and kissed it eagerly: "Your power over me is boundless when you look and speak thus. Forgive me for paining you; indeed it shall not happen again."

The promise had been made a hundred times before,

and broken as often. Erna smiled, but she was still pale as they walked back to the house.

"A scene from Othello seems to be going on there," said Molly, who, notwithstanding her great fatigue, had been chattering incessantly, and observing the lovers the while. "Ernst Waltenberg is perilously like that monster of a Moor. I believe he would make nothing of a murder if his jealousy were excited. It is to be hoped that Erna will put a little common sense into him when they are married; there is very little of it in his love for her at present. I told him about all sorts of interesting things that are going on in the capital, as we were driving over, but he never listened to one of them; he kept his eyes fixed upon the villa, and rushed out of the barouche the instant it stopped before the door. Ah! now he is kissing her hand and humbly begging her pardon. Albert never did that, even while we were betrothed; on the contrary, I was always the one to be forgiven! Albert is not sentimentally inclined, nor is your betrothed, Alice. Is your engineer not coming to-day?"

"I hardly think he will be here," said Alice, allowed for the first time to interpose a word. "Wolfgang has so much to do; he could only be here for a few moments yesterday. The responsibilities of his position are very great."

It sounded composed, too much so for a betrothed maiden who could not but feel herself neglected. Alice knew nothing as yet of what had taken place between her father and her lover a week before in the capital. Wolfgang had refrained from mentioning it even to his friend Reinsfeld; he wished to leave the president, whose arrival was shortly expected, to contrive a pretext for the final rupture. Meanwhile, he saw Alice

as seldom as possible, availing himself of the plea of work, which had sufficed him hitherto.

Frau von Lasberg now made her appearance on the veranda, and greeted Molly with great dignity and little cordiality. The young Frau was to remain until the next day, when her husband was to call for her, and they were to pay a visit at Benno's in Oberstein. Molly played the part of a hurricane in the quiet and elegant household at the villa; from the moment of her arrival all formality was scattered to the winds. Her clear, silvery laughter was heard everywhere; she chatted with Alice, she teased Erna, she disputed with Waltenberg about Oriental customs of which she knew absolutely nothing, provoking beyond measure the old Baroness, and withal fairly beaming with happiness and merriment.

Thus the day wore on to noon, and the golden autumn sunlight tempted all into the open air. Waltenberg proposed a walk up one of the neighbouring heights, and all assented; even Alice, who a few months previously had been debarred from all such enjoyments, was ready to join the party, while Frau von Lasberg was, of course, obliged to remain at home. The little company walked leisurely up the gradual ascent, through the sunlit, fragrant forest, until they reached the foot of a rocky cliff, where the path became steep and stony.

"You must stop here, Alice," said Erna. "The last part of the way is too steep and rough; you must be careful not to overtask your strength. Do you think you are equal to it, Molly?"

"I am equal to anything," declared Molly, half offended at the question. "Do you suppose that Herr Waltenberg and yourself are the only mountaineers? I can outclimb either of you."

Waltenberg smiled rather derisively at this audacious statement, casting a significant glance the while at the speaker's little high-heeled boots. "There is no danger in this ascent," he said: "the path is made quite easy with steps and hand-rails here and there. But then an accident is always possible, as my secretary found to his cost on the Vulture Cliff. He was lucky to escape with only a sprained ankle."

"Oh, that immensely tall Herr Gronau!" exclaimed Molly. "What has become of him? I did not catch even a glimpse of him in Heilborn."

"He asked for leave of absence for a few weeks, but I am now expecting him back again," replied Ernst, who had, in fact, been rather puzzled by Veit's long absence. He knew that his secretary had no relatives left in Germany, and he could not understand his sudden journey. Gronau had not even told him where he was going.

Alice agreed to await the return of the party; and whilst the others pursued their way to the summit of the height, she seated herself on a mossy bit of rock at the foot of the ascent. The spot was a peaceful little nook in the forest depths which no autumnal blast seemed as yet to have touched. The dark pines and the soft moss had preserved their fresh green, and the noonday sun had dispelled the mists which were so apt to linger here and there among the trees. It was as sunny and warm as on a day in spring.

Alice had been sitting alone about ten minutes, when she perceived at a little distance the familiar figure of Dr. Reinsfeld striding along among the trees. He was coming from a patient at one of the mountain-cottages, and was so lost in thought that he emerged upon the little clearing without perceiving the young girl until

she called to him: "Herr Doctor, are you really going to hurry past without even a look for your patient?"

Benno started at the sound of her voice, and paused in surprise: "You here, Fräulein Nordheim, and entirely alone?"

"Oh, I am not so unprotected as you suppose. Herr Waltenberg, with Erna and Molly, has just left me. I only stayed behind——"

"Because you are tired?" was the anxious question.

She shook her head, smiling: "Oh, no; I only wanted to husband my strength for the walk back, in accordance with your orders. You see how obedient I am."

She moved slightly aside, and seemed to expect that the doctor would take his seat beside her. He hesitated for a few seconds, and then accepted her unspoken invitation, and sat down upon the mossy resting-place. They were no longer strangers to each other; in the last few months they had seen and talked with each other almost daily.

Alice went on conversing cheerfully. There was an innocent delight in her gaiety, the delight of a freshly-aroused vitality asserting itself, still half timidly, after years of depressing ill health. No one could be more childlike and simple-minded than this young heiress, who was so little adapted to fill the position assigned her by her father's millions. Here, resting upon her mossy seat, free from all the splendour and pomp which fatigued her, with the golden sunlight playing upon the soft blond hair and the delicately-tinted face, there was an indescribable refinement and charm in her appearance.

The young physician, on the other hand, was unusually grave and silent; he forced himself to smile

and to reply gaily now and then, but the effort he made was perceptible. Alice observed it at last, and she too became more silent, until after a long pause, which Reinsfeld made no attempt to interrupt, she asked, "Herr Doctor, what is the matter?"

"With me?" Benno started. "Oh, nothing,—nothing at all."

"I am afraid that is not quite true. You looked very grave and sad as you were striding along so hurriedly, and it is not the first time I have seen you so. For weeks I have fancied that something has been depressing and troubling you, although you take great pains to conceal it. Will you not tell me what it is?"

The girl's voice was so entreatingly sweet, and her brown eyes looked with so sympathetic a glance of inquiry into those of the young physician, that it was hard to withstand her, and yet Nordheim's daughter ought to be the last to learn the cause of Reinsfeld's mood. She had indeed seen aright; Benno had been suffering for weeks under the burden of the suspicion which Gronau had implanted in his soul. Nothing indeed had as yet been discovered to confirm it, but Reinsfeld divined that Veit's sudden departure and prolonged absence were connected with some clue which was being followed up. He hastily collected himself, and replied, "I find it hard to leave Oberstein. Fatiguing as my practice has been sometimes, and much as I have longed for a more extended sphere of activity, I feel now how attached I have become to the people whose joys and sorrows I have shared for years, and to the mountains where I have had my home. I leave so much behind me that it is hard to go away."

His eyes were cast down as he spoke the last words, or he would have become aware of the instant change

in the girl's face. She turned pale and her look of innocent gaiety vanished, while the wild-flowers that she had plucked on her way up the height dropped upon the moss at her feet. "Is your departure so near at hand?" she asked, gently.

"It is indeed; I am only waiting for my successor to arrive, and he is expected in a week."

"And then you go—forever?"

"Yes,—forever!"

Question and answer sounded sad enough, and a silence ensued. Alice stooped and picked up her scattered flowers, beginning to arrange them mechanically. She knew, of course, of the doctor's acceptance of his new position, but it had not occurred to her that he would leave before her own departure, beyond which her thoughts had not strayed. She had been so happy in the mountains, had resigned herself entirely to the enjoyment of the present, without a thought that it could come to an end, and now she was reminded how near at hand was this end.

"I may go without anxiety," Benno began again. "The health of my district at present leaves nothing to be desired, and you, Fräulein Nordheim, need me no longer. Only be careful for some time to come, and I think I can guarantee your entire recovery. I am very glad to have been able to keep my promise to my friend and to restore him his betrothed well and happy."

"If indeed it makes much difference to him," Alice said, in a low tone.

Reinsfeld looked amazed: "Fräulein Nordheim——?"

"Do you imagine, then, that Wolfgang cares for me? I do not think he does."

There was no bitterness in her words; they were

only sad, and the eyes which Alice raised to the young physician were as sad.

"You do not believe in Wolfgang's love?" he asked, dismaying. "But why, then, should he have——" He broke off in the middle of his sentence, knowing well enough that love had borne no share in his friend's wooing. He remembered only too distinctly how the young engineer had coldly determined to win for a wife the president's daughter, and the contemptuous shrug with which he had repudiated the idea of sentiment in the affair. It was a speculation,—nothing else.

"I have no fault to find with Wolfgang, none at all," Alice went on. "He is always most attentive, and so anxious about me, but I feel nevertheless how little I am to him, and I can see how his thoughts wander whenever he is with me. Formerly I scarcely perceived this, and if I did perceive it, it did not hurt me. I was always so weary; I had no pleasure in life,—it was one long illness for me. But when health began to relieve me of the oppression that had weighed down soul and body, I saw, and understood. Wolfgang loves his calling, the future to which he aspires, his great work, the Wolkenstein bridge, of which he is so proud. He never will love me!"

Benno for a moment could find no reply to these words, which both startled and amazed him, from the girl whom he had supposed entirely indifferent in this matter, and who now thus clearly defined the true state of affairs.

"Wolf's is not an ardent nature," he said at last, slowly. "With him ambition outweighs sentiment; it was his character as a boy, and it is far more evident in the man."

Alice shook her head: "Herr Gersdorf's nature is cool and calm, and yet how he loves Molly! Awhile ago Ernst Waltenberg cared for nothing save untrammelled freedom, and see how love has transformed him! Frau Lasberg, to be sure, says such sentiment is the merest nonsense which hardly outlives the honey-moon, that there is no such thing as the enduring affection of a romantic girl's imagination, and that a woman, if she is wise and hopes for happiness in marriage, must banish all such ideas from her mind. She may be right, but such wisdom is terribly depressing. Do you share it, Herr Doctor?"

"No!" said Reinsfeld, with so decided an emphasis that Alice looked up at him in surprise and with a sad smile.

"Then we are both dreamers and fools, whom sensible people would despise."

"Thank God that it is so!" Benno broke forth. "Never let 'such sentiment' be snatched from you, Fräulein Nordheim; it is all that can make life happy or even worth the living. Wolf has always prophesied that I should never come to good, or make myself a fine position in the world. So be it. I do not care! I am happier than he with all his wisdom and his schemes. He takes no real pleasure in anything,—sees nothing anywhere save bare, forlorn reality, transfigured by no ray of inspiration. I have had a hard life. When my parents died I was knocked about the world, with scant favour from any one, and sometimes, as a student, was hard put to it for bread to eat; even now I possess merely the necessaries of life; but I would not exchange lots with my friend for all his brilliant future."

He was carried away by his emotion, and did not perceive how his words accused Wolfgang; nor did Alice

appear to take note of it, for she looked up with sparkling eyes at the young physician, wont to be so quiet and calm, who seemed for the moment transfigured. Usually shy and reserved; as is the case with all introspective natures, when once the barrier of reserve was overleaped he forgot that any such had ever existed, and went on, with what was almost passionate ardour, "When the sum of our lives is reckoned up, the gain may after all be mine. I question whether Wolfgang would not give all the results he has achieved for one draught from the fountain which flows inexhaustibly for me. We poor, ridiculed dreamers are, after all, the only happy human beings, for in spite of all experience we can love with all our hearts, can hope, and trust, and have faith in truth and goodness. And whatever of disappointment this world may have in store for us, nothing can deprive us of the belief in something higher. We attain heights to which others cannot soar; wings to reach it are worth all their vaunted worldly wisdom!"

Alice listened in breathless silence to these words, the like of which she had never heard beneath her father's roof, but which nevertheless she comprehended at once with the instinct of a warm young heart thirsting for love and happiness. She did not dream that the consciousness of the man who spoke thus in eager defence of faith in all that is best in humanity was burdened with the knowledge of the bitterest failure in the faith and honour of her own father.

"You are right!" she exclaimed, holding out both hands to him as in gratitude. "This faith is the highest, the only happiness in life, and we will not allow it to be snatched from us."

"The only happiness." Benno repeated, while,

scarcely knowing what he did, he clasped and held fast the hands held out to him. "No, Fräulein Nordheim, other joys also await you. Wolfgang's is a noble nature in spite of his ambition; in time you will learn to understand each other, and then he will make you truly happy, or he is utterly unworthy of you. I"—here his voice grew slightly unsteady—"I shall often hear from him and of his married life,—we are faithful correspondents,—and sometimes, perhaps, you will allow me to recall myself to your memory."

Alice made no reply; her eyes filled with tears. Unable to conceal the first profound grief in her young life, at Benno's last words she hid her face in her hands and sobbed uncontrollably.

For Benno this moment was one of intoxicating delight and of intense pain. Another man might perhaps have forgotten all else in the rapture of the revelation thus made, but for him Alice was sacred as the betrothed of his friend; not for the world would he have uttered one of the thousand expressions of love that rose to his lips. He slowly retreated a few paces, and said, almost inaudibly, "It is well that I am to go to Neuenfeld. I have long known how it was with me!"

Neither of the pair had any idea that they were overheard. Just as the doctor had clasped the young girl's hands in his, the shrubbery at the foot of the rock had parted, and Molly, who had intended in jest to startle Alice by her sudden appearance, noiselessly emerged. Her merry face assumed, however, an expression of extreme surprise upon finding her friend, whom she had supposed alone, in Benno's society, and in such evident agitation.

Among the praiseworthy qualities of Frau Gers-

dorf might be reckoned intense curiosity. She was instantly eager to know how this interesting interview would terminate. She therefore retreated unperceived, as noiselessly as she had appeared, and, hid among the bushes, overheard all that ensued, until Waltenberg's and Erna's approaching footsteps became audible as they descended the rocky pathway.

Fortunately, the little lady was not lacking in presence of mind, and, moreover, since she had before her own marriage peremptorily claimed Alice's services as guardian angel, she felt called upon now to requite her after the same manner. So she retreated still farther into the shrubbery, and then called out aloud to the approaching couple that she had easily outstripped them. The result was all that could be desired, and when some minutes later the three new-comers reached the mountain-meadow, Alice was sitting as they had left her, and Benno, grave and silent, was standing beside her. Molly was, of course, immensely surprised at finding her cousin Benno, of whom she straightway took possession. She was resolved to extort a confession from him as soon as they should be alone, and from Alice also,—as guardian angel she had a right to their unreserved confidence.

The little party took its way homewards, and Benno was plied by his young relative with questions, to which he replied absently and mechanically, while his eyes sought the slender, delicate figure walking silently beside Erna; he had not waited until to-day to know that she was dearer to him than aught else on earth.

CHAPTER XIX.

NEMESIS.

THE president made his appearance at the appointed time; until the opening of the railway he was obliged to drive over from Heilborn, and he brought with him Herr Gersdorf, who was to come for his wife. The engineer-in-chief was 'accidentally' absent at a distant post, and could not receive his future father-in-law as usual. Nordheim knew what this meant,—he no longer reckoned upon Wolfgang's compliance,—but he also knew that matters must come to a final explanation.

Molly immediately after dinner invited her husband to walk with her in the grove at the foot of the garden, that she might open her heart to him; but when she would have told her secret she prefaced the revelation by so many mysterious hints, such oracular sentences, that Gersdorf grew uneasy.

"My dear child, pray tell me outright what has happened," he begged her. "I noticed nothing whatever unusual upon my arrival; what have you to tell me?"

"A secret, Albert," she replied, with much solemnity,—"a profound secret, which I adjure you not to reveal. Incredible things have been happening,—here and at Oberstein."

"At Oberstein? Has Benno anything to do with them?"

"Yes!" And here Frau Gersdorf made a long, artistic pause, to give due effect to what was to follow. Then she said, in a tone of the deepest tragedy, "Benno—loves Alice Nordheim."

Unfortunately, the revelation did not produce the desired effect; the lawyer merely shook his head, and observed, with exasperating indifference, "Poor fellow! It is well that he is going to Neuenfeld, where he will soon get such nonsense out of his head."

"Nonsense, do you call it?" Molly exclaimed, indignantly. "And you suppose it can be easily got rid of? You probably could have done so if you had not married me, Albert, for you are a heartless monster!"

"But an excellent husband," Gersdorf, who was quite used to such tragic outbursts from his wife, asserted with philosophic serenity. "Moreover, the case was not similar. I knew that in spite of obstacles I could win you, and then I was sure of your love."

"And so is Benno. Alice loves him also," Molly explained, gratified to perceive that her husband took this announcement much more seriously. He listened in thoughtful silence, while, after her usual lively fashion, she told of the scene on the mountain-meadow, of her concealment among the trees, and of her extremely vigorous efforts to smooth matters, as she expressed it.

"An hour later I had Benno alone by himself," she continued. "At first he would not confess,—not a word; but I should like to see any one conceal from me what I have resolved to find out. Finally I said to him, frankly, 'Benno, you are in love, desperately in love,' and then he denied it no longer, but said, with a sigh, 'Yes, and hopelessly so!' He was in despair, poor fellow, but I told him to take courage, for I would undertake to arrange the affair."

"That must, of course, have consoled him greatly," the lawyer interposed.

"No; on the contrary, he would not hear of it.

Benno's conscientiousness is positively something frightful. Alice was the betrothed of his friend,—he could not even allow his thoughts to dwell upon her,—never would he see her again, but if possible he would start for Neuenfeld to-morrow, and a deal more of such nonsense. He forbade me to speak to Alice. Of course, as soon as his back was turned, I went to her and extorted a confession from her too. In short, they love each other dearly, intensely, inexpressibly. So there is nothing for them to do but to be married!"

"Indeed?" said her husband, rather surprised by this conclusion. "You seem to have quite forgotten that Alice is betrothed to the engineer-in-chief."

Frau Molly turned up her little nose contemptuously; that betrothal never had found favour in her eyes, and at present she was inclined to make short work of it.

"Alice never loved that Wolfgang Elmhorst," she asserted, with decision. "She said yes because her father told her to, because she had not the energy then to say no, and he—well, what he wanted was a wealthy wife."

"A very good reason, as you must admit, for disinclination to relinquish her."

"I told you just now, Albert, that I was going myself to undertake the adjustment of the affair," Frau Molly declared, with dignity. "I shall see Elmhorst, and appeal to his generosity, representing to him that unless he wishes to make two people wretched he must withdraw. He will be touched and softened, he will bring the lovers together, and——"

"There will be a most romantic scene," Albert concluded her sentence. "No, that is just what he will *not* do. You little know the engineer-in-chief if you credit him with such sensibility. He is not the man

to withdraw from a connection that insures him the future possession of millions, and he will soon console himself for lack of affection in his wife. And what do you suppose Nordheim will say to your romance?"

"The president?" Molly asked, dejectedly. In the contemplation of her scheme in which she played the part of beneficent fairy, joining the hands of the lovers with all the emotion befitting the occasion, she had quite forgotten that Alice had a father whose word might be decisive in this matter.

"Yes, President Nordheim, who brought about this betrothal, and who will hardly consent to dissolve it, and to bestow his daughter's hand upon a young country doctor, who, with all his courage and capacity, has nothing to give in return. No, Molly, the affair is perfectly hopeless, and Benno is quite right to resign all hope. Even if Alice really loves him, she has promised her hand to Wolfgang, and neither he nor her father will release her. There is no help for it, they must both submit."

He might have gone on thus forever without convincing his wife. She knew what her own obstinacy had effected in uniting her with her lover, and she would not see why Alice could not persist in the same manner. She listened, indeed, attentively, and then cut short any further remarks from her husband by declaring, dictatorially,—

"You do not understand it at all, Albert! They love each other. Then they ought to marry; and marry they shall!"

What could Gersdorf say to refute such logic as this?

Meanwhile, Alice Nordheim was in her father's study, which she rarely entered, and which she must

have sought now for some important purpose, for she looked pale and agitated, and as she stood leaning against the window-frame, seemed to be undergoing an inward struggle; yet there was nothing in prospect save an interview between the father and daughter. There was, to be sure, nothing of confidence or intimacy in the relation existing between them. Nordheim, who had surrounded his daughter with all the luxury and splendour that wealth could procure, took, in fact, very little interest in her, as Alice had always felt, but in her docile compliance with whatever her father desired, there had never been any collision between them.

For the first time this was otherwise; she was about to go to her father with a confession, which must, she knew, provoke his wrath, and she trembled at the thought, although her resolution never wavered.

All at once the president's step was heard in the next room, and his voice said, "Herr Waltenberg's secretary? Certainly. Show him in!"

Alice stood hesitating for a moment; her father, who did not suspect her presence here, was not alone, and, agitated as she was, she could not confront a stranger. Probably the man brought some message from Waltenberg, and his business would shortly be despatched. The young girl, therefore, slipped into her father's bedroom, which adjoined his office, and the door of which remained ajar. Nordheim immediately entered the room she had left, and was shortly joined there by his visitor.

The president received him with affable ease. He knew that Ernst in his travels had picked up somewhere an individual who, ostensibly his secretary, played the part of his confidential friend, but he took

no further interest in the matter. He either had not heard or had not heeded his name; at all events, he did not recognize his former friend. Twenty-five years are long in passing, and such a life as Gronau's had been is a great disguiser. This man with his brown, deeply-furrowed face and gray hair had nothing in his appearance to recall the fresh, merry youth who had gone out into the world to seek his fortune.

"You are Herr Waltenberg's secretary?" It was thus that Nordheim opened the conversation.

"Yes, Herr President."

Nordheim started at the sound of the voice, which aroused dim memories within him. He directed a keen glance towards the stranger, and, motioning to him to be seated, he went on:

"I suppose we shall not see him to-day? Have you a message from him? Your name, if you please."

"Veit Gronau," was the reply, as the speaker calmly seated himself.

The president looked extremely surprised; he examined the weather-beaten features of his former friend, but the memories thus unexpectedly awakened seemed far from agreeable, and he was apparently not inclined to admit that there had ever existed any friendship between himself and his visitor. His manner distinctly indicated the inferior position which he chose to assign to his friend's secretary.

"We are not, then, entire strangers to each other," he remarked. "I was acquainted in my youth with a Veit Gronau——"

"The same who has the honour of waiting upon you at present," Gronau concluded the sentence.

"It gives me pleasure to hear it." The pleasure was but coldly expressed. "And how have you thriven in

the mean while? Well, it would seem, your position with Herr Waltenberg must be a very agreeable one."

"I have every reason to be contented. I have hardly reached your heights, Herr President, but one must not expect too much."

"True, true. Human destinies are very various."

"And when men undertake to control them, it all depends upon who can best steer his own boat."

The remark displeased the president as being too familiar; he desired no intimacy with his former comrade, so he said, evasively,—

"But we are straying from the object of your visit. Herr Waltenberg sends you to——?"

"No," Gronau replied, drily.

Nordheim looked at him in surprise: "You do not bring me a message from him?"

"No, Herr President. I have just returned from a journey, and have not yet seen Herr Waltenberg. I announced myself in my capacity of his secretary in order to make sure of your receiving me. I come about an affair of my own."

At this disclosure the president became several degrees colder and more formal, for he suspected some favour to be asked; yet the man seated so calmly before him, looking at him with so searching an expression in his clear, keen eyes, did not look like a suppliant; there was something of defiance in his bearing which impressed Nordheim disagreeably.

"Go on, then," he said, with perceptible condescension. "All relations between us are far in the past, nevertheless——"

"Yes, they date from five-and-twenty years ago," Gronau interrupted him. "And yet it is precisely of what then occurred that I wish to speak,—to pray you

to inform me what has become of our—excuse me—of my former friend, Benno Reinsfeld?”

The question was so sudden and unexpected that Nordheim was silenced for a moment, but he was too entirely accustomed to self-control to be long disconcerted by such surprises. One suspicious glance he shot at his questioner, and then, with a shrug, he replied, coldly,—

“You really demand too much of my memory, Herr Gronau. I cannot possibly call to mind all the acquaintances of my youth, and in this instance I do not even remember the name you mention.”

“Indeed? Then let me assist your memory, Herr President. I allude to the inventor of the first mountain-railway locomotive,—the engineer, Benno Reinsfeld.”

The men looked each other in the eye, and instantly the president knew that there was nothing accidental in his visitor's presence, that he was confronting a foe, and that the words which sounded so innocent barely disguised a menace. He must next know whether the man appearing thus after years of exile were really dangerous, or whether this were merely an attempt to extort money from his possible fears. Nordheim seemed inclined to the latter belief, for he said, frigidly, “You must be falsely informed. *I* invented the first mountain-locomotive, as is shown by my patent.”

Gronau suddenly rose, his dark face flushed still darker. He had devised a regular scheme of action, arranged in his mind how he should attack his opponent and drive him into a corner, until not a chance of escape was left him, but at such audacious falsehood all his prudent plans fell to pieces, and honest indignation got the upper hand of him.

"You dare to tell me that to my face!" he burst out, angrily. "To me, who was present when Benno showed us his invention, and explained it, and you admired it, and praised him! Does your memory play you false there also?"

The president calmly reached for the bell-rope: "Will you leave the house, Herr Gronau, or must I call the servants? I am not inclined to submit to insult beneath my own roof."

"I advise you to let the bell alone," Gronau burst forth, furiously. "Take your choice, whether what I have to say shall be said to you alone, or to all the world. Refuse to listen,—I can find a hearing everywhere else."

The threat was not without effect; Nordheim slowly withdrew his hand. He saw that it would not be easy to deal with this resolute, determined man, and that it would be best not to provoke him further, but his voice was still impassive as he said, "Well, then, what have you to say to me?"

Veit Gronau stepped up to his former comrade, and his eyes flashed: "That you are a scoundrel, Nordheim, neither more nor less!"

The president started, but in an instant burst out, "What! you dare——?"

"Oh, yes; and I dare far more, for this is not a matter to be hushed up easily. Poor Benno, indeed, neither could nor would defend himself; he bowed his head beneath the stroke, and suffered more, I fancy, from the consciousness of the treachery of a friend than from the treachery itself. Had I been here at the time you would not have got off with your booty so easily. Don't trouble yourself to look indignant. 'Tis of no use with me. I know you, and we are alone;

no need for play-acting. You had better make up your mind what answer to make when I accuse you in public."

In his excitement his voice rang out clear and distinct. Nordheim made no further attempt to check his words, but he must have felt quite secure, for he never for an instant lost his bearing of calm superiority.

"What answer to make?" he said, with a shrug. "Where are your proofs?"

Gronau laughed bitterly: "I thought you would ask that. Therefore I did not come instantly to you when I heard the sorry tale from poor Benno's son in Oberstein. I have spent three weeks in following up traces. I have been in the capital, in Benno's last place of residence,—even in the town where we were all three born."

"And are they found,—these proofs of yours?" The question was pronounced in a tone of extreme contempt.

"No, nothing; that is, that could convict you. You insured yourself well against discovery, and Reinsfeld meanwhile delayed applying for a patent for his invention because he did not consider it yet complete. That was the time when I left home and you accepted a position in the capital. Poor Benno worked away at his invention and perfected it, building many a castle in the air the while, until one fine day he heard that his invention had been bought and patented; but the patent and the money were both in the pocket of his best friend, of whom they made a millionaire."

"And this is the precious tale you mean to relate to the world?" the president sneered. "Do you actually believe that the assertion of an adventurer like your-

self could ruin a man of my standing? Why, you yourself admit the absence of proof."

"Of all direct proof; but what I have learned is quite enough to make the ground hot beneath your feet. Reinsfeld himself made an effort to recover his rights; of course he was unsuccessful, although he found credence here and there. Then he lost courage and gave up all hope. But the matter was talked of; you were forced to defend yourself against suspicion, and now you have as an antagonist not poor, inexperienced Benno, but myself. Look to yourself in this encounter. I have sworn to indemnify the son of my friend as far as is possible for the wrong done to his father, and I am wont to keep my word, whether for good or for evil. As an 'adventurer' I have nothing to lose, and I shall proceed against you ruthlessly and resolutely; I shall forge weapons against you out of all that I have lately learned, and shall publish to the world the suspicion, the knowledge of which was formerly confined to a very narrow circle. We shall see whether the truth can die away unheard when an honest man is ready to vindicate it with his very life."

There was an iron determination in his words and manner, and Nordheim was quite able to measure the power of this antagonist. He seemed engaged in a mental conflict for a minute or two, and then he asked, in a low tone, "What is your price?"

Gronau's lip quivered with a contemptuous smile: "Ah, you are ready to barter, then?"

"It may come to that. I do not deny that such a scandal as you threaten to raise would be very disagreeable to me, although I am far from perceiving any danger in it. If you should propose reasonable

conditions I might, perhaps, bring myself to make a sacrifice. Therefore, what do you ask?"

"Very little for a man of your stamp. Pay to Benno's son, young Dr. Reinsfeld, the entire sum which you formerly received for the patent. It is his lawful inheritance, and would be wealth to him in his present circumstances. Moreover, you must confess the truth to him,—privately, for all I care,—and give to the dead his due, at least in his son's eyes. This done, I will answer for it that the matter shall be immediately dropped."

"Your first condition I accept," Nordheim replied, as though he were settling some business transaction, "but not the second. You must content yourselves with the money, which, indeed, will amount to a considerable sum. I suppose you will go shares in it."

"Is that your opinion?" Gronau asked, scornfully. "But how indeed should you know anything of honest, unselfish friendship? Benno Reinsfeld does not even know that I have come to you, or of the conditions I propose, and I shall have trouble enough, God knows, to induce him to accept what is lawfully his, and his only. I should consider it a disgrace to touch a penny of it. But enough of this. Will you accept both conditions?"

"No; only the first."

"I will retract nothing. I must have both the money and the confession."

"Which will place me completely in your power? Never!"

"Good! Then we have done with each other. If you wish for war you shall have war!"

Gronau turned and walked towards the door; the president made as if he would have detained him, then

apparently changed his mind, and in another moment it was too late: the door had closed behind Veit.

When Nordheim was alone, he began to pace the room rapidly to and fro. Now when there were no witnesses present it was evident that the interview had nowise left him as indifferent as he had feigned to be. There was a deep furrow in his brow, and in his face anger and anxiety strove for the mastery; gradually he began to be calmer, and at last he paused and said, half aloud, "'Tis folly to allow this to discompose me thus. He has no proof. I deny everything."

He turned towards his writing-table, when suddenly he stood rooted to the spot, and a low cry escaped his lips. The door of his sleeping-apartment had opened noiselessly, and upon the threshold stood Alice, ashy pale, both hands clasped against her breast, and her large eyes riveted upon her father, who recoiled from her as from some spectre.

"You here?" he said, harshly. "How did you come here? Have you heard anything of what has been said?"

"Yes,—I heard everything," the young girl replied, scarce audibly.

Then for the first time Nordheim changed colour. His daughter present at that interview! But the next moment he had collected himself; it surely could not be difficult to divest of all suspicion the mind of this innocent, inexperienced girl who had always yielded so readily to his authority. "It certainly was not meant for your ears," he said, with asperity. "I really cannot understand your playing the part of eavesdropper when you must have heard that a purely business matter was under discussion. You have now been witness to an attempt to blackmail your father,—

an attempt which I ought perhaps to have repulsed more decidedly. But such audacious liars have the best men at a disadvantage. The world is ever too ready to credit a falsehood, and where a man is, like myself, engaged in great undertakings, demanding principally the entire confidence of the public, he cannot afford to expose himself to the faintest suspicion. It is better to be rid of such fellows as this man, who live by blackmail, at the expense of a sum of money; —but you understand nothing of it all! Go to your room, and pray do not visit mine in secret again.”

His words did not produce the desired effect: Alice stood motionless. She made no reply; she did not stir; and her silence seemed to irritate the president still further.

“Do you not hear me?” he said. “I wish to be alone, and I require that no word of what you have heard should pass your lips. Now go!”

Instead of obeying, Alice slowly approached him, and said, in a strange, nervous tone, “Papa, I have something to say to you.”

“About what? Not this attempt at blackmail, I trust? I have explained to you how matters stand, and you will hardly give credence to that scoundrel.”

“That man was no scoundrel,” the young girl replied, in the same strange tone.

“Indeed?” the president burst forth. “And what am I, then, in your eyes?”

No answer, only the same rigid distressed look riveted upon her father’s face. There was no longer any question in it, but a condemnation, and Nordheim could not bear it. He had confronted his accuser with a brazen brow, before his child’s eyes his own sought the ground.

Alice caught her breath; at first her voice failed her, but it gained in firmness as she went on:

"I came here to make a confession, papa,—to tell you something that might have angered you. I do not care to speak of it now. I have only one question to ask you: Are you going to afford—Dr. Reinsfeld the satisfaction required of you?"

"Not at all. I shall abide by my last words."

"Then I shall give it to him in your stead."

"Alice, are you bereft of your senses?" the president, now really alarmed, exclaimed; but she went on, undeterred:

"He does not indeed need your confession, for he knows the truth; he must have long known it. Now I know why he changed so suddenly, why he often looked at me so sadly, and never would betray what troubled him. He knows everything. And yet he has shown me nothing save kindness and compassion, has used every effort to restore me to health,—me, the daughter of the man who——" She could not finish the sentence.

Nordheim made no further attempt to appear indignant, for he saw that Alice was not to be imposed upon, and he also saw that he must give up the attempt to control her by severity. She had foolishly resolved upon what might ruin him; her silence must be secured at all hazards.

"I, too, am convinced that Dr. Reinsfeld has nothing to do with the matter," he said, more calmly; "that he is sufficiently wise to see the folly of such threats. As for your silly purpose to speak of them to him, I am sure you are not in earnest. What is the affair to you?"

The young girl stood erect, and her face took on an

indescribably stern expression quite foreign to it: "It ought indeed to be much more to you, papa! You knew that Dr. Reinsfeld dwelt near us, that he laboured night and day, in absolute poverty, and you never even tried to make good to him the wrong done to his father. Life and mankind have been so cruel to him: he was thrust out into the world in his childhood; as a student he lacked every means of support, while you won millions with that money, built palaces, and lived in luxury. At least do what Gronau asks, papa. You must,—or I shall attempt it myself."

"Alice!" Nordheim exclaimed, between anger and utter amazement at finding his daughter, the gentle, docile creature who had never before ventured to contradict him, now laying down the law for him. "Have you no idea of the meaning of the affair? Would you deliver up your father to his worst enemy, who——"

"Benno Reinsfeld is not your enemy," Alice interrupted him. "If he were, he would long since have made use of the secret to extort from you something quite different from that demanded by Gronau,—for—he loves me!"

"Reinsfeld—loves you?"

"Yes,—I know it, although he has never told me so. I am betrothed to another, and he, who could obtain from you what he chose by threats, is going from here without one demand, without even a word with you, because he would fain spare me the terrible knowledge, which, nevertheless, is now mine. You do not dream of the extent of this man's magnanimity. I now know it all!"

The president stood speechless; he was not prepared for this turn of affairs, for it required no great amount of perspicacity to perceive that Benno's love was re-

turned. The girl's passionate indignation spoke plainly enough, and if Reinsfeld really knew the story of the past—and that he did so seemed beyond a doubt—there was in fact but one explanation of his reserve and his silence in a matter so nearly concerning him. He had relinquished the advantage which his knowledge gave him that she whom he loved might be saved from disgrace. There was nothing therefore to apprehend from him; the father of the girl whom he loved was secure from his revenge, and perhaps he might induce Gronau also to be silent.

"This is an astounding piece of news!" Nordheim said, slowly, after a short pause, during which he had watched his daughter narrowly. "And I hear it rather late. You spoke just now of a confession. What had you to tell me?"

Alice cast down her eyes, and a burning blush replaced the pallor of her cheek: "That I do not love Wolfgang, nor does he love me," she answered, in a low tone. "I did not know it at first myself, but it has become clear to me within the last few days."

She confidently expected a burst of anger from her father, but nothing of the kind ensued; on the contrary, his voice was quite changed, as he said, in an unusually gentle tone, "Why have you no confidence in me, Alice? I would not force my only daughter to contract a marriage in which her heart had no share; but this must be well considered and reflected upon. For the present I only ask that you will not be overhasty in your resolves, but will leave it to me to find a solution of the difficulty. Trust your father, my child; you shall have no cause for dissatisfaction with him."

He stooped to press a paternal kiss upon her fore-

head, but she shrank away from the caress with an evident expression of dislike.

"What does this mean?" Nordheim asked, with a frown. "Are you afraid of me? Do you not believe me?"

She raised her eyes to his with the same hard, accusing look in them, and her voice, usually so gentle, was inexorably stern, as she replied, "No, papa; I believe neither in your love nor in your kindness. I shall never believe you again,—never!"

Nordheim bit his lip and turned away, mutely motioning to her to leave the room. As mutely she obeyed.

She had rightly divined that the president never for a moment entertained the idea of a marriage between his daughter and the young physician, although he had no scruples in hinting at such a possibility in order to avert for the moment a threatening danger. But he had miscalculated his daughter's insight; the young, inexperienced girl had seen through his device, and, man of iron though he was, he could not endure it. He had preserved his composure in presence of Wolfgang's haughty indignation and of Gronau's threats. His anger had been aroused, and at most he had experienced a vague dread. Now for the first time in his life he felt the sting of shame. Even although the danger menacing him should be averted, he could not away with the consciousness that he was judged and condemned by his only child.

CHAPTER XX.

BLASTS AND COUNTERBLASTS.

THE construction of the railway was pushed forward with feverish haste. In fact, it was no easy task to have the work completed at the promised time; but Nordheim was right in declaring that the engineer-in-chief would spare neither himself nor his subordinates. Elmhurst spurred on his workmen to incredible exertions; he was present everywhere, superintending and directing, giving to his staff of engineers an example of unwearied devotion to duty that inspired their emulation. Under his leadership their capacity for work seemed doubled, and he actually attained his end. The numerous structures on the line of mountain-railway were now all but finished, and the last touches were being put to the Wolkenstein bridge.

Wolfgang had just returned from his day's expedition. He had dismissed his vehicle in Oberstein, that he might pursue the rest of his way on foot, and now he was standing upon a cliff above the Wolkenstein abyss, watching the workmen, swarming like busy ants upon the trestles and framework of the bridge. A few days more would witness the completion of the work, which already excited universal admiration, and which in the course of a year or two would arouse the wonder of thousands; but he who had created it stood gazing at it as gloomily as if all pleasure in his creation had departed.

He had evaded for to-day an interview with the president, testifying by his absence to his adhesion to

his refusal; but some explanation was unavoidable. That the breach between them was final both knew; Nordheim was scarcely the man to accept for his son-in-law one who had so frankly and contemptuously defied him, and from whom he could expect in future no support in his schemes. The question was now how the separation was to be made, since the interests of each required that it should take place as quietly as possible. This was all that was to be arranged, and this was to be settled on the morrow.

The sound of a horse's hoofs close at hand roused Elmhorst from his reflections, and turning he perceived Erna von Thurgau upon one of the rough ponies purchased for use among the mountains. She drew rein, evidently surprised, as she recognized the engineer-in-chief.

"Back already, Herr Elmhorst? We thought your expedition would take up an entire day."

"I finished my inspection sooner than I anticipated. But you cannot ride on for a few moments, Fräulein von Thurgau: they are blasting just below there; it will be all over, however, in ten minutes."

The young lady had already perceived the obstacle; the road leading down the descent and past the bridge was temporarily barricaded, while beyond a number of workmen were busied in blasting a large fragment of rock.

"I am in no hurry," she said, indifferently, "and, besides, I must wait for Herr Waltenberg, who begged me to ride on while he spoke with Herr Gronau, whom he met just now quite unexpectedly. I do not wish to be too far in advance of him."

She let her bridle hang loose, and seemed to bestow all her attention upon the workmen. The previous

night had brought an entire change in the weather,—a cold rain had obscured all the sunny, fragrant beauty of the landscape. The skies hung dark and gray above the earth, the mountains were veiled in mist, and the wind whistled in the forests,—autumn had come in a single night.

"We shall see you this evening, Herr Elmhorst?" Erna asked, after a silence of several minutes.

"I regret extremely that I cannot possibly come. I shall be very much occupied this evening."

It was the old pretext to which he had so often had recourse; but it no longer found credence. Erna said, with evident significance, "You are probably not aware that my uncle arrived this forenoon?"

"Oh, yes, I know it, and have excused my absence to him; I shall see him to-morrow."

"But Alice does not seem well. She will not, it is true, admit any indisposition, nor will she allow Dr. Reinsfeld to be summoned, but she looked so pale and ill awhile ago when she came out of her father's room, that I was quite alarmed."

She seemed to expect an answer, but Elmhorst continued to gaze towards the bridge in silence.

"Surely you ought to forsake your work for to-day and see after your betrothed."

"I have no longer the right to call Fräulein Nordheim my betrothed," Wolfgang said, coldly.

"Herr Elmhorst!"

"Yes, Fräulein von Thurgau. Differences of opinion have arisen between the president and myself of so decided a character that any adjustment is impossible. We have both withdrawn from the intended connection."

"And Alice?"

"She knows nothing of it as yet, at least through me. Possibly her father may have acquainted her with the matter; in any case, she will submit to his decision."

The words testified clearly to the nature of the strange alliance, which had in fact existed only between Nordheim and his intended son-in-law. Alice had been betrothed since the interests of both men required that so it should be, and now when these interests no longer existed the betrothal was dissolved without even referring the matter to her; it was taken for granted that she would submit. Erna too seemed to have no doubt upon the subject, but she changed colour at the unexpected intelligence. "It has come, then, to this," she said, softly.

"Yes, it has come to this. I was asked to pay a price far too high for me or——, and I made my choice."

"I knew how you would choose!" the girl exclaimed, eagerly. "I never doubted it!"

"Ah, you did me that justice, then!" Wolfgang said, with undisguised bitterness. "I hardly expected it of you."

She made no reply, but there was reproach in her eyes; at last she said, with hesitation, "And—what now?"

"Now I stand just where I did a year ago. The path which you once pointed out to me with such enthusiasm lies open before me, and I shall pursue it, but alone,—entirely alone."

Erna shivered slightly at his last words, but apparently she did not choose to understand them; she interposed, hastily, "A man like yourself is not alone. He has his talents and his future, and the future before you is so grand and——"

"And as dreary and sunless as that mountain-world," he completed her sentence, pointing to the autumnal, cloudy landscape. "But I have no right to complain. It came to meet me once, happiness, brilliant and sunlit, and I turned my back upon it to attain another goal. Then it spread its wings and departed, soaring to unattainable heights; and although I would give my very life for it, it never will come back to me. Those who trifle with it lose it forever."

There was dull, aching misery in his voice as he made this confession, but Erna had no word of reply for him, and no glance for the eyes seeking her own. Pale and rigid, she gazed abroad into the misty distance. Yes, he knew now where for him lay rest and happiness,—now, when it was too late!

Wolfgang laid his hand upon the horse's mane: "Erna, one question before we part. After my final interview with your uncle to-morrow I shall, of course, not enter his house again, and you are going far away with your husband. Do you look for happiness at his side?"

"At least I hope to confer happiness."

"And you?"

"Herr Elmhorst——"

"Ah, you need not repulse me so sternly! No self-interest lurks behind my question. My sentence I listened to from your lips on that moonlit night upon the Wolkenstein. Even were you free I should be hopeless, for you never could forgive my wooing of another."

"No,—never!" The words were harsh in their decision.

"I know it, and hence these last words of warning. Ernst Waltenberg is not the man to make such a

woman as yourself happy. His love is rooted in the egotism that is the basis of his entire nature. He never will ask himself whether he may not be torturing by his jealous passion the woman whom he loves, and how will you endure constant companionship with a man to whom all the lofty ideals which are to you inspiration are but dead ideas? At last I have learned to know—dearly as the knowledge has been purchased—that there is something loftier and better than the self which once bounded my horizon. He never will learn this!”

Erna’s lips quivered; she had long known it far better than any one could tell her. But what availed such knowledge? For her also it was too late.

“You are speaking of my betrothed, Herr Elmhurst,” she said, in a tone of reproof,—“and to me. Not another word of the kind, I entreat!”

Wolfgang bowed and retired: “You are right, Fräulein von Thurgau; but they were farewell words, and as such may be forgiven.”

She inclined her head in assent, and was about to turn away, when Waltenberg appeared on the edge of the forest, urging his horse towards the pair. He and the engineer-in-chief exchanged the coldly courteous greetings habitual to them in what had become their almost daily intercourse. They spoke of the weather, and of the president’s arrival,—Ernst being now first aware of the barricade in the road.

“The men are unconscionably dilatory about their blasting,” said Wolfgang, glad to find an opportunity to cut short the interview. “I will go and hasten them; you shall not have to wait long.”

He hurried down the slope, but something seemed to be amiss with the blasting, and the engineer who

was directing the proceedings came forward to explain matters to his chief. Wolfgang shrugged his shoulders impatiently and passed on into the midst of the workmen, apparently to examine the work himself.

Meanwhile, Waltenberg stayed with his betrothed, who asked him, "You spoke with Gronau, then?"

"Yes, and I took no pains to conceal my surprise at finding him here, since he had not been to see me in Heilborn, or informed me of his return. In reply he begged me to see him this evening; he has something to tell me, which he says concerns me in a certain sense. I am really curious to know what it is. He is not wont to be oracularly mysterious. Look, Erna, how dark and threatening the sky is above the Wolkenstein. Will that storm not overtake us?"

"Hardly to-day," said Erna, with a glance towards the veiled mountain-top. "To-morrow perhaps, or the day after. In spite of our fine autumn, the tempests which our poor mountaineers so dread seem to be setting in earlier than usual. We had a forerunner of them last night."

"There must be something more than fable in the magic power of your Alpine Fay," Ernst said, half in jest. "That cloudy peak, which is well named, for it scarcely ever unveils, has actually cast a spell around me. It allures and attracts me with a mysterious, wellnigh irresistible charm, tempting me to lift the veil of the haughty Ice-Queen, and to snatch from her the kiss hitherto denied to mortals. If one should try that precipice on this side——"

"Ernst, you promised me to give up all such ideas forever," Erna interposed.

"And I will keep my word. I promised you on St. John's eve."

"On St. John's eve," the girl repeated, softly, dreamily.

"Do you remember that evening when I yielded to your request? I had resolved firmly upon an ascent of the Wolkenstein, but my resolution vanished before the entreaty in your eyes,—your words. Would you really have been distressed had I then disobeyed you?"

"But, Ernst, what a question!"

"It would not have been incumbent upon you then to be so; I was not then your declared lover." There was again the old tormenting jealousy in his voice. "You would probably have been distressed about Sepp or Gronau if either of them had undertaken the ascent. I mean that trembling anxiety which only assails one where one dearly loved is concerned,—a dread before which all else pales and vanishes,—the distress which would drive me blindly to encounter any danger if I knew you exposed to it. I suppose you know nothing of that?"

"Why conjure up such fancies?" Erna said, half impatiently. "I have your promise, and therefore no ground for distress. Why dwell upon an 'if'——?"

A crash as of thunder interrupted her. Below them earth and stones were hurled into the air, and the huge mass of rock, split into three fragments, fell apart with a dull thud, while on the instant a terrific commotion arose. The assembled labourers rushed away from the bridge towards the spot where the engineer-in-chief with his subordinate officer had been standing an instant before. It was impossible to see what had occurred; all that was to be perceived was a close group of men, whence cries of alarm and dismay were heard.

But above them all there rang out such a shriek as is the utterance of an agony of despair, and Ernst,

turning, saw his betrothed, erect in her saddle, every vestige of colour fled from her face, gazing towards the spot where the catastrophe had occurred.

"Erna!" he exclaimed. She did not hear him, but gave her horse the rein. The brute, terrified by the noise, shied and would not go forward. A merciless cut with the whip forced it to obey, and the next instant horse and rider were speeding down the slope towards the group of men.

It parted at Erna's stormy approach; some of the labourers, who thought the horse had become unmanageable from fright, seized it by the bridle and stopped it. Erna seemed hardly aware of it; in mortal terror her eyes sought only—Wolfgang! and on the instant she perceived him standing quite unhurt in the midst of the throng.

He too had seen her as she broke through the crowd; he had recognized the look that sought him out,—had heard the deep-drawn sigh of relief when she found him uninjured,—and from his eyes there shot a ray of passionate ecstasy. His mortal peril had revealed her secret,—she did love him, then!

"Your fear was unfounded; the engineer-in-chief is unharmed," said Ernst Waltenberg, who had followed his betrothed and had paused just outside the throng. His voice sounded unnatural, his face was strangely pale, and in the dark eyes now riveted upon Erna and Wolfgang there gleamed an evil fire. Erna shivered, and Wolfgang turned hastily. It needed but a glance to tell him that he was confronting a deadly foe; yet appearances must be preserved in view of all these stranger eyes.

"The affair might have turned out badly," he said, with forced composure. "The blast was tardy at first,

and then took place before we could get well away from it. Two of the men are wounded; I am glad to know, only slightly. The rest of us escaped almost by a miracle."

"But you are bleeding, Herr Elmhorst," said one of the engineers, pointing to Wolfgang's forehead, where two or three trickling drops of blood were visible. The young man pressed his pocket-handkerchief upon the wound, of which he had not before been aware.

"It is not worth mentioning; one of the stones must have grazed my forehead. Have the wounds of those men bandaged immediately. Fräulein von Thurgau, I regret that the accident should have frightened you——"

"It frightened my horse, at least," Erna interposed, with ready presence of mind. "It shied and ran; I could not control it."

The fiction was a plausible one and gained instant credence from the bystanders, explaining as it did the sudden appearance of the young lady and her evident terror and emotion. It was fortunate that the frightened animal had been brought under control in time.

There were two men, however, who were not thus deceived,—Wolfgang, to whom those few instants of alarm had revealed a certainty which came, indeed, too late, but which he would not for worlds have relinquished, and Ernst, who still maintained his place, closely observing the pair. There was a contemptuous emphasis in his voice as he remarked,—

"We have been fortunately spared another catastrophe. Have you recovered from your alarm, Erna?"

"Yes."

"Then we will continue our ride. *Au revoir*, Herr Elmhorst."

Wolfgang bowed formally, perfectly comprehending the significance of that '*Au revoir*;' then he turned to see after the wounds of the two men, which were in fact very slight, as was his own. A fragment of stone had, as he said, merely grazed his forehead. The entire occurrence seemed to have ended very fortunately.

But this was only seeming, as might have been clearly seen in Waltenberg's countenance. He rode beside his betrothed in silence, without even turning towards her; this went on for a quarter of an hour, until Erna could bear it no longer.

"Ernst," she said, softly.

"Beg pardon?"

"Let us turn back. The skies are more threatening, and we can take the mountain-road home."

"As you please."

They turned their horses into another road, and again complete silence ensued. Erna was only too conscious that she had betrayed herself, but she could have borne the wildest outburst of jealousy from her betrothed rather than this gloomy silence, which was terrible. She did not indeed fear for herself, but she saw that an explanation was inevitable so soon as they should reach the house.

Her expectations were, however, disappointed, for at the door of the villa, after Ernst had helped her to dismount, he got on his horse again.

"You are going?" she asked, surprised.

"Yes. I need the open air this afternoon."

"Do not go, Ernst. I wanted to ask you——"

"Good-bye!" he interrupted her, curtly; and before she could make any further attempt to detain him he was gone, leaving her a prey to a vague anxiety in her ignorance of his intentions.

When Waltenberg reached the forest he checked his horse's speed and rode on slowly beneath the dark pines, through the tops of which the wind was whistling. He needed no further explanation; he knew everything now,—everything! But in the midst of the tempest raging within him he was aware of a savage satisfaction; the phantom which had tortured him for so long had finally taken on flesh and blood. Now he could assail and destroy it!

CHAPTER XXI.

A CHALLENGE.

It was evening; Elmhorst was in his office with Dr. Reinsfeld, who had arrived half an hour previously, and from the air of both men it was evident that the subject of their conversation was a grave one. Benno seemed especially agitated.

“So matters stand at present,” he concluded, after a long explanation. “Gronau came directly to me after his interview with the president, and all my efforts to deter him from his purpose are vain. I begged him to remember that it would cost him his position with Waltenberg, who never could tolerate such an assault upon the fair fame of the uncle and guardian of his betrothed, and that he had no positive proof; that Nordheim would do all that lay in his power to brand him as a liar and slanderer. It was of no use. He reproached me bitterly with cowardice,—with indifference to my father's memory. God knows, he was

wrong there; but—I cannot bring forward the accusation!”

Wolfgang had listened in silence, a contemptuous smile hovering about his lips. It was high time indeed to break off all association with that man; never for an instant did he doubt the truth of Gronau's suspicions.

“I thank you for your frankness, Benno,” he said. “It would have been perfectly excusable if you had never taken me into consideration, but had treated only as your father's son. I know how great is the regard you thus show me.”

Benno cast down his eyes; he was conscious that these thanks were undeserved. It was not to spare his friend that he would have buried that discovery in oblivion.

“You understand that I cannot possibly move in the affair,” he rejoined. “I must leave it to you to speak with your future father-in-law——”

“No,” Wolfgang coldly interrupted him.

Reinsfeld gazed at him in surprise. “You will not?”

“No, Benno; Gronau has openly declared war to him, as you tell me, therefore he is fully prepared; and, moreover, my relations with him are no longer what they were. We are parted once for all.”

The doctor's amazement was inexpressible: “Parted? And your betrothal with Fräulein Alice——”

“Is at an end. I cannot give you a detailed explanation of the matter. Nordheim has shown himself to me also,—as what you now know him to be. He endeavoured to impose upon me conditions entirely inconsistent, in my opinion, with my honour; therefore I was obliged to retire.”

Reinsfeld still stared at him, bewildered; he could

not understand how the man who had once staked everything upon this connection could speak thus composedly of his shattered hopes.

"And Alice is free?" he managed to ask at last.

"Yes. But what is the matter with you? What is it?"

Benno had started up in extreme agitation: "Wolf, you never loved your betrothed. I am sure of it, or you could not speak so coldly and calmly of losing her. You do not even know what you are losing, for you never appreciated what you possessed."

There was so passionate a reproach in his words that they betrayed everything. Elmhorst was startled, and gazed at the doctor half incredulously: "What does this mean? Benno, can it be—what? do you love Alice?"

The young physician's honest blue eyes sparkled as he looked into those of his friend: "No need to reproach me with it, Wolf. I have never spoken a word to your betrothed that you might not have heard, and when I saw how impossible it was to struggle against my love, I made up my mind to depart. Do you suppose I would ever have accepted the position in Neuenfeld, which I more than suspected was the result of the president's influence, if any other way out of the difficulty had been possible? There was nothing else to do if I wished to leave Oberstein."

The most conflicting sensations were pictured on Wolfgang's features as he listened. True, he had never loved his betrothed, but Benno's confession touched him very strangely, and there was something akin to bitterness in his voice as he said, "Well, I am no longer an obstacle in your way, and if you have any hope that your love is returned——"

"It would be vain!" Reinsfeld interposed. "You

know now what happened between our fathers,—enough to separate me from Alice forever.”

“Perhaps so, constituted as you are. Another man, on the contrary, might use it to force from Nordheim a consent which he assuredly would otherwise refuse. That you never could be induced to do.”

“No, never!” Benno said, sadly. “I am going to Neuenfeld, and I shall in all probability never see Alice again.”

They were interrupted by the announcement that Herr Waltenberg wished to speak with the engineer-in-chief. Elmhorst instantly arose, and Reinsfeld prepared to leave. “Good-night, Wolf,” he said, cordially extending his hand. “Nothing can sever our friendship; we must always be what we have always been to each other,—eh?”

Wolfgang warmly returned the pressure of the hand thus given: “Good-night, Benno. I shall see you to-morrow.”

He went with him to the door of the room, just as Waltenberg made his appearance; a few words were exchanged among the young men, and then Reinsfeld departed, and the two were left alone.

Ernst seemed to have regained his self-control during his lonely ride of two hours; his manner, at least, was cold and collected, although there was still a gleam in his eyes that boded no good.

“I hope I do not interrupt you, Herr Elmhorst?” he said, slowly approaching the young engineer.

“No, Herr Waltenberg; I expected you,” was the reply.

“So much the better; there is no need, then, of any preface to what I am come to say. No, thank you!” he interrupted himself, as Elmhorst offered him a chair.

"Between us formal courtesy is superfluous. I need not tell you why I am here. Our interpretation of the scene of this afternoon differed from that of the strangers then present, and I have a few words to say to you with regard to it."

"I am quite at your service."

Ernst folded his arms, and there was a trace of contempt in his voice as he continued: "I am, as you know, betrothed to Baroness von Thurgau, and I am not inclined to allow in my betrothed so intense an interest in the peril of another man. But that is a matter between herself and myself. What I desire to know at present is how far you are implicated in this interest. Do you love Fräulein von Thurgau?"

The question sounded like a threat, but Wolfgang's answer came instantly and simply: "Yes."

A flash of deadly hatred shot from Ernst Waltenberg's eyes, and yet this confession told him nothing new. He knew from Erna herself that she had loved another, but he had fancied that he should have to seek that other in the grave, among the shades. Here he stood living before him, the man who could sacrifice an Erna to wretched mammon; a man incapable of a pure, exalted affection, and who yet held his head as haughtily erect as if there were no reason why he should bow before any on earth. This irritated Ernst still more.

"And this love does not probably date from to-day or from yesterday? As far as I know, you have frequented the house of the president for years,—before I returned from Europe, before Baroness von Thurgau was betrothed."

"I regret being obliged to refuse to give you any satisfaction on these points," Wolfgang replied, as

frigidly as before. "I am quite ready to answer **any** question you have a right to put. I refuse to submit to a cross-examination."

"I can well believe it," Waltenberg declared, with a bitter laugh. "You would fare but ill in such an examination,—as the betrothed of Alice Nordheim."

Elmhorst bit his lip,—the shot found a joint in his armour, but he recovered himself in an instant:

First of all, Herr Waltenberg, I must request you to change your tone, if this conversation is to be prolonged. I will tolerate no insults, least of all, as you were now, from yourself."

I am not to blame if the truth insults you," Ernst retorted, arrogantly. "Contradict my words, and I will retract them. Until you do, you must allow me to entertain my own opinion with regard to a man who loves, or pretends to love, a woman while he woos and wins a wealthy heiress. You cannot possibly ask esteem for such a paltr——"

"Enough!" Wolfgang cut short his words. "No need of abuse to attain your end. I am perfectly aware of why you are here, and I will not balk you. But such words as you are using I forbid. I am in my own house."

He confronted his antagonist erect and very pale. Something in the man commanded respect, even as he thus repelled the imputation which his conduct had ostensibly deserved. Ernst could not but feel that his rival bore himself with dignity, hard as it was to admit it.

"You adopt a lofty tone," said Waltenberg, with a sneer. "'Tis a pity your betrothed is not here; in her presence there might not be so much conscious rectitude in your manner."

"I am no longer betrothed," Wolfgang coldly declared.

Waltenberg retreated a step in extreme amazement.

"What—what do you mean?"

"I simply inform you of a fact to show you that the cause for the imputation with which you would insult me exists no longer, for *I* was the one to withdraw from the engagement."

"When? For what reason?" The questions were put hurriedly.

"On these points I owe you no explanation."

"I am not so sure of that, for here, as it seems to me, you are reckoning upon my magnanimity. You are mistaken. I never will release Erna; and she herself, as I know, will never ask her release at my hands. She does not make a promise to-day to break it to-morrow, and she is far too proud to give herself to a man who preferred wealth to her love."

"Pray cease your attempts to use the old weapon: it has lost its point," Elmhorst said, sternly. "Born and bred in the very lap of luxury as you were, ignorant of all self-denial, what can you know of the struggles and efforts of one longing to rise, consumed by ambition to win recognition for himself, to attain a great goal? I yielded to temptation, yes; but I have delivered my soul now, and can bid defiance to your boasted virtue. You too would have succumbed if life had denied you fortune and happiness,—you first of all,—and it may be you would not have fought your way free as I have, for, by heaven! the struggle is no easy one."

There was such convincing truth in his words that Ernst was silent. He to whom luxury was a necessity of existence could hardly have withstood temptation;

but because he could not help the conviction that **this** was so, did he all the more detest the man who had come off conqueror in the fiercest of all battles,—the conflict with self.

“And now go, and hold your betrothed to her promise,” Wolfgang went on, still more bitterly. “She will not break it, nor will she forgive me for what has been. There you are right. I have paid for my wrongdoing with my happiness. Force Erna to bestow upon you her hand; her love you cannot gain, for that belongs to me,—to me alone!”

“Ah, you dare——!” Ernst began, furiously, but paused before the cold, proud triumph in the eyes that met his own.

“Well? upon what ground now would you quarrel with me? That I love your betrothed is hardly an insult; that I am beloved you cannot pardon. I never knew it myself before to-day.”

Waltenberg looked as if he would fain have flown at the throat of the man who thus uttered what could not be gainsaid; in a voice half stifled by passion he rejoined, “Then you can easily conceive that I shall hardly consent to share the love of my betrothed with another,—with a living rival at least.”

Elmhorst shrugged his shoulders: “Is this a challenge?”

“Yes, and the affair had best be concluded as soon as possible. I will send Herr Gronau to you to-morrow to make the necessary arrangements, and I hope you will agree that to-morrow shall decide——”

“Not at all,” Elmhorst interrupted him. “I shall have no time to-morrow, nor the day after.”

“No time for an affair of honour?”

“No, Herr Waltenberg. In fact, I have no great

opinion of these affairs of honour which consist in trying to put an end as quickly as possible to a man whom one hates. But there are cases in which one must be false to his convictions rather than incur the imputation of cowardice. So I am ready. But we working-men have an honour of our own apart from that cherished as such by the favoured idlers of society, and mine demands that I should not expose myself to the possibility of being shot before the task which I have undertaken to fulfil has been accomplished. In eight or ten days the Wolkenstein bridge will be finished,—I shall then have completed my task; I shall have seen my work accomplished. Then I shall be at your disposal, but not an hour sooner. Until then you will be obliged to curb your impatience.”

There was an almost contemptuous deliberation in the manner in which all this was stated to the man to whom it was scarcely intelligible. Waltenberg had never worked, never devised anything that he loved and would fain see completed; he had never done aught save follow the impulse of the whim of the moment. Now this impulse incited him to the destruction of his enemy or to his own ruin,—he did not stop to ask which; but to be obliged to wait for days, to stay his thirst for revenge,—the thing seemed an impossibility.

“And if I do not accept this condition?” he asked, sharply.

“Then I do not accept your challenge. The choice is yours.”

Ernst clinched his fist in suppressed fury; but he saw that he must submit: it was his antagonist’s right to require this delay.

“So be it, then!” he said, controlling himself by an

effort. "In from eight to ten days. I rely upon your word."

"You will find me ready."

A formal, hostile bow was given on both sides, and Ernst left the room, while Elmhorst slowly walked to the window.

Outside, the moon, visible now and then among the clouds, cast an uncertain light over the landscape. For a moment it emerged clearly, and in its rays was revealed the bridge, the bold structure which had promised its creator so proud a future. And out into the same light strode the man who had sworn his death,—whose hand was sure when a foe was to be removed from his path. Wolfgang made no effort at self-deception: he bade farewell to his dreams for the future, as he had already bidden farewell to his happiness.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISIT.

DR. REINSFELD sat in his room, writing diligently. So much had to be arranged and prepared for his successor, who was to arrive in the course of the next week, and who was to buy the house and furniture. The young physician's belongings were not very valuable, nevertheless he looked about him upon his poor possessions with a sad, yearning expression. Here he had been so happy, and so miserable!

A carriage drove up and stopped before his door. Benno looked up from his writing to see who his visitor

might be, and then hurried to the door, in surprise, as he recognized the graceful figure of Frau Gersdorf about to alight. This distinguished relative, whose acquaintance he had formerly dreaded to make, had come to be his cherished little friend, whose interest in his unhappy love was intense. He had been obliged to discourage this interest of hers, but he was nevertheless grateful for it.

He went out with a welcome upon his lips to open the carriage door, but started, dismayed, for beside his young cousin sat a shyly shrinking figure,—Alice Nordheim.

“Yes, I am not alone,” said Molly, highly delighted by the effect of her surprise. “We have been out driving, and did not wish to pass through Oberstein without seeing you. Well, Benno, are you not glad we stopped?”

Reinsfeld stood dumfounded. Driving in this cold rainy weather? Why had Alice come? And why did she tremble so as he helped her out of the carriage, seeming afraid to look at him? He could not utter a word; but indeed there was no need that he should, for Frau Gersdorf gave no one any chance to speak. She chattered on until they were in Benno’s study, and then she began afresh:

“And so here we are. You wanted to come, Alice, and now you look as if you would like to run away. Why? I may surely call upon my cousin if I please, and you are with me, chaperoned by a married woman, so your duenna can make no possible objection. And you need not be in the least embarrassed, children. I know everything,—I grasp the entire situation, and it is very natural that you should wish to talk to each other. So now begin!”

She seated herself in the arm-chair which the doctor had just left, and prepared with great solemnity to assist at the interview. But a long pause ensued,—neither Alice nor Benno spoke,—and, after some minutes of silence, Molly began to be tired.

“I dare say you would rather talk without listeners,” she remarked. “Good! I will go into the next room, and see that no one interrupts you.”

Without waiting for a reply, she suited the action to the word, and left the room for the one adjoining, by the closed door of which she placed herself as sentinel.

But Molly had forgotten the other door of the study, which led through a small vestibule out into the garden, and she was quite unconscious that through the garden Veit Gronau was just now approaching the house, leaving Said and Djelma to await him at the garden gate.

Ernst Waltenberg had not returned to Heilborn on the previous evening, although he had promised to meet his secretary there. Early this morning a messenger from him had brought Gronau the intelligence that he had taken up his abode for a few days in the little inn at Oberstein, and that the two servants were to be sent to him with all that was necessary for his comfort. This had been done, and Veit had accompanied them. Driving up the steep mountain-road had been very difficult, wherefore all three had preferred to walk the last part of the way, leaving the vehicle to bring the luggage.

The foot-path which they pursued led directly past the doctor's garden. Gronau walked up the little enclosure and opened the familiar back-door. His last interview with Benno had been a stormy one,—he had

bitterly reproached the young physician with his indifference,—and his kindly nature would not long allow him to cherish any unkind feeling. He came now partly to apologize, and partly in hope of finding the doctor more in sympathy with his wishes. As the Nordheim carriage was standing before the front entrance of the house, he had no suspicion of the visit which Benno was receiving, else he would have fled in dismay.

Meanwhile, Frau Gersdorf maintained her guard^s with unwearied devotion,—a devotion all the more disinterested since the stout oaken door effectually deadened the voices of the pair she had left. Their conversation, moreover, was far from what she had hoped would ensue.

Benno, after waiting in vain for Alice to break the silence, said, gently,—

“And you really wished to come hither, Fräulein Nordheim,—really?”

“Yes, Herr Doctor,” was the low, trembling reply.

Reinsfeld knew not what to think. Lately Alice's intercourse with him had been perfectly easy and familiar. True, since their last interview in the forest, her ease of manner had vanished, but that could not explain this alteration in her. She stood pale and trembling before him, seeming actually afraid of him, for she retreated timidly when he would have approached her.

“You are afraid—of me?” he asked, reproachfully.

She shook her head: “No, not of you, but of what I have to tell you. It is so terrible.”

Reinsfeld was still puzzled for a moment, and then suddenly the truth flashed upon him.

“Good God! You do not know——?”

He paused, for, for the first time, Alice looked up at him with eyes filled with such misery, such despair, that all other reply was needless. He hastily went up to her and took her hand.

"How could it be? Who could have been so cruel, so dastardly, as to distress you with *that*?"

"No one!" the girl said, with an evident effort. "By chance—I overheard a conversation between my father and Herr Gronau——"

"You cannot believe I had any share in it!" Benno hastily interposed. "I did all that I could to restrain Gronau; I refused to give him my sanction."

"I know it,—and for my sake!"

"Yes, for your sake, Alice. What can you fear from me? There was no need that you should come hither to entreat my silence."

"I did not come for that," Alice said, softly. "I wanted to ask your pardon—your forgiveness for——"

Her voice was lost in a burst of sobs; suddenly she felt herself clasped in Benno's arms. She was no longer Wolfgang's betrothed; he was no traitor to his friend; he might for once clasp his love in his arms, while she wept convulsively upon his breast.

Just at this moment Veit Gronau opened the side-door, and paused in dismay upon the threshold. He would have been less amazed if the skies had fallen than he was by the sight that met his eyes. Unfortunately, he did not possess Frau Gersdorf's diplomatic talent for noiselessly disappearing and pretending not to have observed anything; on the contrary, his surprise expressed itself in a long-drawn "A—h!"

The lovers started in terror. Alice in great confusion extricated herself from Benno's embrace, and the doctor lost all his presence of mind, while the intruder

maintained his stand upon the threshold, and in his dismay never thought of stirring. At last the young girl fled into the next room to Molly, while Benno, with a frown, approached his unbidden guest: "This is an unexpected visit, Herr Gronau, a surprise indeed."

His tone was unusually sharp, but Gronau did not seem to notice it. He entered the room, and, with an air of extreme satisfaction, said, "This is quite another affair,—quite another affair."

"What of it?" Benno exclaimed, impatiently; but Veit tapped him cordially on the shoulder:

"Why did you not tell me this? Now I understand why you would not accuse Nordheim. You were quite right, quite right."

"Nor will I suffer any one else to do so," Reinsfeld declared, his irritation only aggravated by Gronau's genial tone. "I deny any one's right to meddle in my affairs; understand me, Herr Gronau."

"I have no idea of doing anything of the kind," said Gronau, quietly. "'Tis well that I have said nothing to Herr Waltenberg as yet. Of course the matter must be kept quiet among ourselves. You have been far wiser than I, Herr Doctor. How could you bear my scolding so patiently? I never gave you credit for such cleverness."

"Can you suppose me capable of sordid calculation?" Benno exclaimed, angrily. "I love Alice Nordheim."

"So I saw just now," Veit observed. "And she seemed very willing. Bravo! Now we shall go to work with the Herr President very differently. We shall say not a word about the stolen invention, but shall simply ask for his daughter's hand, and his millions will naturally follow it. 'Tis a fact, Benno, that

you have shown a vast amount of cleverness. Your arrangement of the matter would satisfy even your father in his grave."

"That is your view," Benno declared, sadly. "Alice's and mine is very different. What you saw was only a farewell forever."

At this intelligence, Veit looked as if he had suddenly received a box on the ear.

"Farewell? Forever? Doctor, I verily believe you are out of your senses."

The young physician was wont to be all patience and gentleness, but at this interference with his most sacred emotions he lost his temper so thoroughly that he tried to be rude.

"Herr Gronau, let me reiterate my request that you will no longer meddle in my affairs. Do you suppose that I can ever call by the name of father a man who so injured my father? You understand nothing of any refinement of sentiment."

"No, I suppose not; but all the more do I comprehend what is practical, and this matter is as simple as possible. You possess a means of forcing Nordheim to consent to your marriage with his daughter, whom you love. Use it and marry her. Anything else is nonsense, and that's an end of it!"

"My opinion precisely," said a voice from the doorway, and Frau Gersdorf, having heard the last words, advanced into the room and took part with aplomb in the conversation.

"Herr Gronau is perfectly right. The matter is as plain and simple as possible," she repeated. "All you have to do, Benno, is to marry Alice, and there's an end of it."

Poor Reinsfeld thus assailed on both sides might

well tremble for his 'refinement of sentiment.' He made up his mind to a final effort, and declared,—

"But I will not. I am the one, and the only one, to decide here!"

"A pretty lover you are!" exclaimed Gronau raising his hands to heaven in despair.

Molly, however, took a much more practical view of the case, and attacked Benno's obstinacy from the other side.

"Benno!" she said, reproachfully, "there sits poor Alice in the next room crying her very heart out. Will you not try at least to comfort her?"

This was perfectly successful. Benno hesitated for a moment, but only for a moment, then he rushed into the next room.

"There! he will not come back for some time," said Molly, closing the door behind him. "Now we can take the affair in hand, Herr Gronau."

But this was too much for Veit Gronau's declared distrust of womankind. Charming as was this new ally, her very presence reminded him of how false to his avowed principles he was in thus standing godfather to a love-affair. He suddenly remembered his attendant spirits still waiting at the garden gate, and with a hurried and awkward apology he took his leave, while Frau Gersdorf, with much self-satisfaction, seated herself in the doctor's study to await the close of the interview in the next room, and to reflect upon the vicissitudes that beset the path in life of a self-constituted guardian angel.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A JEALOUS LOVER.

For three days there had been raging in the Wolkenstein district a storm which even in this mountain-region was held to be unprecedented in violence. The keen blasts of November set in several weeks earlier this year and were unusual in their fury. In addition, the rain poured down day and night; in certain valleys there had been rain-spouts which had deluged the fields, and had so swollen streams and brooks that they had burst all bounds, overflowed their banks, and made travel impossible. Communication with Heilborn was interrupted, intercourse between neighbouring hamlets and villages was maintained with difficulty, and the danger increased from hour to hour.

In the Nordheim villa preparations had been made for a return to the capital, but any such intention had to be given up, since travel was not to be thought of in this weather. All regretted the impossibility, and longed to be gone, for the entire household was oppressed as by some gloomy spell.

Alice pleaded indisposition, and had not left her room for several days, availing herself of this pretext to avoid meeting her father, whom she had dreaded since their last interview; but the president's mind was filled with far other anxieties. He probably never noticed his child's avoidance of him, nor was he aware of the strained relations existing of late between Erna and her betrothed.

The good fortune which had befriended him hitherto

during his life seemed all at once to be forsaking him ; it was as if some hostile power were at work, frustrating all his efforts, confusing all his schemes, and confounding all his expectations.

The boldly-conceived plan, the success of which was to gain him millions, was shattered, and its ruin came from a quarter whence he had never looked for it. The man whom he thought indissolubly bound to himself and to his interests withdrew from his plans at the decisive moment, and made their execution impossible. Nordheim knew perfectly well that if the engineer-in-chief, his future son-in-law, refused to approve the estimates as they had been made out, it would be impossible to present them to the company. The scheme was naught since Elmhorst refused his aid, opposing a frigid refusal to all efforts to persuade him. There had been a brief, stern interview between the two men, and it had set the seal upon their estrangement.

Then Wolfgang had spent an hour with his betrothed. What had passed at this interview no one was told, not even the girl's father. Alice, with unwonted decision, refused to speak of it, but the parting had surely not been unkindly, for when Elmhorst left the house, not to enter it again, Alice had waved him a farewell from the window more cordial than any she had ever vouchsafed him while they were betrothed, and he had responded with equal cordiality.

Nordheim was not a man to bear with equanimity the ruin of schemes which he had spent years in developing, and to his vexation on that score was added annoyance at Gronau's threats, which he had at first underestimated. He regretted that he had not attempted at least to conciliate the former friend, whose restless energy he had been familiar with of old. It

had been a mistake to make an enemy of him, a mistake which might have serious consequences.

For the moment it was, however, all thrown into the background in view of a threatened loss which dwarfed all other anxiety in the president's mind. The mountain-railway, which should have been completed in a few days, was in great peril from the freshets. From all quarters came terrifying reports,—one piece of bad news followed another. The injury done was already serious; if the storm should continue and the water mount higher it might be incalculable, and Nordheim was implicated pecuniarily to an extent which could not but be very grave even to a man of his vast wealth.

Erna and Molly, whose departure had been perforce postponed, were in the drawing-room. The lawsuit which had brought Gersdorf to Heilborn had been decided by a compromise, the arrangement of which detained the lawyer a few days longer. His wife was at first delighted, for in her capacity of guardian angel she considered her presence in the Nordheim household as absolutely necessary, although, to her great disappointment, she was obliged to admit that she had nothing here to protect.

The engineer-in-chief had retired; his betrothal with Alice was dissolved, as all the family now knew, and Alice obstinately refused to open her heart to her friend. Benno was just as impracticable, seeming to persist in his idea of a separation, and, worse than all, no human being required any advice or counsel from Frau Doctor Gersdorf, who was naturally indignant at such base insensibility.

"That is my reward for my philanthropy," she said, very much out of humour. "Here I sit, as upon a desert island in the midst of the ocean, cut off from

all the world, separated from my husband, in danger of being swept away at any moment by a deluge. Albert may be obliged to rescue my corpse from the raging element and return to town an inconsolable widower. I wonder if he will marry again? It would be horrible. I should turn in my grave. But then men are capable of anything."

Erna, standing at the window looking out at the storm and rain, hardly heard this chatter; her thoughts were elsewhere.

"We are not in any peril here, Molly," she said at last. "The house is perfectly safe, standing as high as it does, but I am afraid matters look serious in Oberstein and on the railway."

"Oh, the engineer-in-chief will take care of that," Molly declared, confidently. "We hear from all sides of his heroic conduct, how he accomplishes the impossible. We never did this Elmhorst justice. He released Alice although he resigned millions by so doing, and now he is exerting himself to the utmost to preserve the railway for your uncle, although they separated in anger. Confess, Erna, that you were prejudiced against him."

"Yes—I was," Erna replied, softly.

"There comes your betrothed!" exclaimed Molly, joining Erna at the window. "How odd he looks! The water is actually pouring from his waterproof; he has ridden over from Oberstein in this storm. I think he would really go through fire and water for one hour with you. But marriage puts an end to all that, my child; trust the experience of a wife of four months. My lord and master sits calmly with his manuscript in Heilborn and waits until the weather is clear enough to come to me. Your romantic Ernst appears, indeed,

to be made of different stuff. But what is the matter with him? For three days he has been glooming about like a thunder-cloud, never taking his eyes off you when you are in the room. It is positively terrible to see you together. Nothing will persuade me that there has not something occurred between you. Do be frank with me, Erna; open your heart to me. I am as silent as the grave."

She clasped her hands upon her breast in asseveration of her trustworthiness, but Erna, instead of throwing herself into her arms and confessing, returned the greeting of her betrothed as he alighted from his horse, and then said, evasively, "You are quite mistaken, Molly; nothing has happened,—nothing at all."

Frau Gersdorf turned away provoked: no one seemed in the least need of a guardian angel; these people had a very stupid way of managing their affairs themselves. The little lady could not understand it, and she rustled out of the room decidedly out of humour.

Scarcely was she gone when Waltenberg entered. He had laid aside his hat and cloak, but nevertheless his dress showed traces of the storm, against which no cloak was a protection. He greeted his betrothed with his usual chivalric courtesy, but there was something chilling in his air which was strangely contradicted by the glow in his dark eyes. Molly was right: he was indeed like some thunder-cloud, whose depths threaten ominously.

Erna went to meet him in evident embarrassment; she had learned to dread this icy calm.

"Well, how is all going on outside?" she said. "You come directly from Oberstein?"

"Yes, but I had to take a roundabout way, for the mountain-road is under water. Oberstein itself looks

tolerably secure, but the villagers have entirely lost their heads, and are running about bewailing themselves incessantly. Dr. Reinsfeld is doing all that he can to bring them to reason, and Gronau is giving him all possible support, but the people are behaving like lunatics because they think their paltry belongings are in peril."

"Those paltry belongings, however, are all that they have in the world," the girl interposed. "Their own lives and those of their families depend upon them."

Ernst shrugged his shoulders indifferently: "I suppose so; but what is that in comparison with the tremendous loss sustained by the railway? As I entered the house just now tidings of fresh disasters were brought to the president. Nothing but ill news from all quarters. Everything seems to be imperilled."

"But they are working away desperately; can it be entirely in vain?"

"Yes, the engineer-in-chief is waging desperate warfare against the elements," Ernst said, with a kind of savage satisfaction. "He is defending his beloved creation to the death, but against such catastrophes no mortal power avails. The water is steadily rising, the dikes are giving way, and the bridges on the lower portion of the road are already carried off. All nature seems in revolt."

Erna was silent. She went again to the window, and looked out into the mist, which made any distant view impossible. Even the stretch of railway in the vicinity of the villa was invisible, while the roaring of the waters was distinctly audible. Below there Wolfgang was doing battle at the head of his men, fighting, perhaps, in vain.

"The Wolkenstein bridge stands firm, at all events,"

Waltenberg continued. "Herr Elmhorst ought to be satisfied with that, and not expose himself so foolishly, as he does at every opportunity. He is no coward, it must be admitted, but it is folly to risk his life to save every dike that is threatened. He does wonders at the head of his engineers and labourers, who follow his lead blindly. They had better take care, or he will drag them with him to destruction."

There was a cold, calculating cruelty in his way of speaking to his betrothed of the peril threatening the life of the man whom he knew she loved. She turned and gave him a sad, reproachful glance: "Ernst!"

"Beg pardon?" he asked, without heeding her glance.

"Why do you avoid the frank explanation which I have so often tried to give you? Do you not wish for it?"

"No, I do not desire it. Let us be silent about it."

"Because you know that your silence torments me more than any reproaches, and because it gives you pleasure to torment me."

The girl's eyes flashed, but her passionate outbreak was met with icy coolness: "How you misapprehend me! I wish to spare you a painful explanation."

"And why? I do not feel guilty. I will neither deny nor conceal anything——"

"No more than you did at our betrothal!" he interposed, severely. "You were very frank then—about everything save the name. You intentionally left me in error,—an error for which I was originally accountable."

"I feared——"

"For him—of course! I perfectly understand that. But reassure yourself. I am not particular as to time; I can wait."

Erna shuddered at his strange, significant words: "Wait—for what? For God's sake tell me what you mean!"

His smile was cold and cruel as he replied, "How timid you have grown! You used to be braver; but in fact there is one thing which can inspire you with absolutely senseless terror, as I have seen."

"And for this one thing you force me to do penance daily! It is an ignoble revenge, Ernst. I will refuse you no answer, no confession, that you ask for: only tell me, have you spoken with Wolfgang Elmhurst since that day?"

A full minute passed before Ernst replied, during which he studied her every feature intently. "Yes," he said slowly, at last.

"And what passed between you?" Her voice trembled with suppressed anxiety, though she tried hard to control it.

"Excuse me, that is a matter between Herr Elmhurst and myself. But you need not distress yourself: I found Herr Elmhurst quite ready to forestall my wishes, and we parted, understanding each other perfectly."

He emphasized every word ironically, and his irony drove Erna to the last extremity. Hitherto she had mutely endured everything lest she should irritate him still more against Wolfgang. She knew that he would fain be revenged upon him; but now, thoroughly roused, she said, indignantly, "Take care, Ernst; do not go too far. You may repent it. I am not yet your wife; I can still release myself——"

She did not finish her sentence, for Waltenberg's grasp upon her wrist was like steel, as he muttered, "Try it; the day that you sever the tie between us is the last of his life."

Erna grew pale: his face told her more than his threat. Now that he had dropped the mask of coolness and irony there was in his expression something tiger-like, and the evil fire in his eyes made her shudder. She knew he would suit his deeds to his words.

"You are horrible!" she said, below her breath. "I—submit!"

"I knew it," he said, with a laugh. "My arguments are convincing."

He slowly released her hand, for Molly, having got over her fit of the sulks, entered the room, curious to know how all was faring in Oberstein, what her cousin Benno was doing, and how it looked along the railway; she had, as usual, a thousand questions to ask.

Waltenberg replied courteously; he had instantly recovered his self-possession, and one would never have suspected the tiger-like nature that he had betrayed a moment before.

"If it would give you pleasure, and you are not afraid of the rain, we might ride down," he said, after a detailed description of the freshet.

"Pleasure!" cried Molly, who with all her waywardness was truly tender-hearted. "How can you use the word in view of such misery?"

"True," Ernst replied, with a shrug, "a single man can avail nothing; but I assure you the spectacle is extremely interesting."

Erna uttered no word of reproof, but this utter selfishness inspired her with horror. Down below there, hundreds were expending their utmost force to preserve a bold creation upon which they had laboured for years; enormous sums of money were at stake, and, moreover, the poor mountaineers were threatened with the loss of their little all. Ernst had not one

word of compassion or of sympathy in view of this calamity; he regarded it all as a very interesting spectacle, and if he experienced any other sensation, it was satisfaction that the work of his enemy was menaced with ruin.

And this man would force her to spend an entire, long life at his side; she must belong to him body and soul; and should she rebel and try to break the chain which she had almost involuntarily allowed to be thrown around her in a moment of surprise, he threatened her with the death of him whom she loved, and thus disarmed her. He had found a menace before which all defiance, all opposition, vanished.

The president's voice was heard in the next room giving orders in an agitated tone, and the next moment he appeared, very pale, and evidently retaining his composure only by a great effort. According to the latest intelligence, the worst was to be apprehended; he wanted to go down himself and see how matters stood with the railway. Waltenberg immediately declared his intention of accompanying him; and, turning to his betrothed, he asked, as quietly as if nothing special had passed between them, "Will you not come too, Erna? We shall ride to those places that are in the greatest peril. I know you are not afraid."

Erna hesitated for a few seconds, and then hastily consented. She must see what was going on; she could not wait and watch here, looking out into the driving mist which veiled everything, and only hearing reports from the scene of disaster. They were going to the places in the greatest peril; Wolfgang would be there. She should at least see him!

Molly, who did not understand how any one could venture out in such weather, looked after them, shak-

ing her head, as they rode away. Even the president was on horseback, for in the present condition of the roads the mountain conveyances were quite useless; the stout mountain-ponies had much ado to get over the ground through the thick mud. The little party rode on in oppressive silence; now and then Waltenberg made a brief remark, which was scarcely heeded. They took their way first to the Wolkenstein bridge.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE AVALANCHE.

THE Wolkenstein had shrouded its crest more closely than ever: heavy clouds were encamped about its peak and floated around its cliffs; wild glacial torrents were rushing down from its ice-fields, and blasts of wind raged over it day and night. The Alpine Fay was extending her sceptre over her domain; the savage queen of the mountains was revealed in all her terrific might, in all her terrible majesty.

The autumnal tempests had often been disastrous; more than once they had brought freshets and avalanches; many a village, many a lonely mountain-grange, had suffered; but such a catastrophe as this had not occurred in the memory of man. Strangely enough, the hamlets were comparatively spared; the storms and floods threatened the railway, which, following the course of the stream, traversed the entire Wolkenstein district, and with its myriad bridges and structures offered many a point for attack.

The engineer-in-chief had, with his accustomed fore-

sight and energy, adopted precautionary measures from the first. The entire force of labourers was called out to protect the railway; the engineers were at their posts day and night. Elmhurst seemed to be everywhere at once. He flew from one threatened spot to another, exhorting, commanding, inspiring courage, and exposing himself recklessly to danger. His example fired the rest: all that mortal energy could do was done; but human strength is vain in a conflict with the unfettered elements.

For three days and nights the rain had been pouring in torrents; the countless veins of water, wont to trickle harmlessly and in silver clearness from the heights, rushed in cataracts down into the valley; the brooks were swollen rivers, breaking through the forests, and tearing away with them huge rocks and uprooted pines, all hurrying towards the mountain-stream, whose waters steadily rose, and dashed their foaming, tumbling waves against the railway-dikes. They could no longer resist the savage onslaught, and at last they were flooded here and torn down there,—the wet, soggy ground gave way everywhere and carried with it woodwork and masonry. The bridges too could no longer resist; one after another succumbed to the assault of the waves, the force of which it was vain to try to stem. In consequence of the pouring rain, both ground and rock gave way; one of the stations was entirely destroyed, and the others were much injured. The raging wind increased tenfold all danger and the difficulty for the labourers. Had the engineer-in-chief not been at their head, the people must have given up in despair, and have merely looked on at the destruction they thought themselves powerless to prevent.

But Wolfgang Elmhorst fought the battle to the bitter end. Step by step, as he had once conquered this domain, he now defended it. He would not succumb, would not give over his work to ruin; but whilst he was thus putting forth all the energies of his nature in saving it from destruction there rang in his ears incessantly the last words of old Baron von Thurgau: 'Have a care of our mountains, lest, when you are so arrogantly interfering with them, they rush down upon you and shatter all your bridges and structures like reeds. I should like to stand by and see the accursed work a heap of ruins!'

The gloomy prophecy seemed near its fulfilment, after all these years. Forests and rocks had been penetrated, streams turned aside, and the spacious mountain-realm bound in the iron fetters that were to make it subservient to human purposes. Men had boasted that they had subdued and chained the Alpine Fay, and now just as their work was drawing to a close she had arisen from her cloudy throne and angrily protested. She was descending in storm and destruction, and before her breath all the proud structures of man's devising were crumbling to ruin. No courage, no energy, no desperate struggle, availed; the savage elemental Force hurled to destruction in the space of a few days all that which it had cost human ingenuity years of toil to effect, laughing to scorn those who had dreamed of subduing it.

The Wolkenstein bridge, it is true, stood secure and firm when everything else was being swept away. Even the white, seething foam tossed aloft by the dashing river did not reach it, suspended as it was at a dizzy height above the abyss. And all the blasts of heaven raged in vain against the iron ribs of the huge

structure. It rested upon its rocky foundations, as if built to bid defiance to destruction for all eternity.

The station which served as a temporary habitation for the engineer-in-chief had since the beginning of the storm been the head-quarters where all reports were received and whence all orders were issued. This portion of the railway had been hitherto thought secure, for at this place it crossed one of the narrow, deep valleys, passed over the Wolkenstein bridge, and then on the lofty steep cliffs turned again to the mountain-river, which just here made a large curve. The freshet which was so destructive to the lower stretch of railway could not reach this upper portion. But now glacial torrents had broken loose from the Wolkenstein, and the masses of mud and fragments of rock which they brought with them extended even to the bridge. The danger here must have been imminent, for Elmhorst himself was on the spot directing the labourers.

In the prevailing confusion and hurry the arrival of the president and his companions was hardly noticed; one or two of the engineers, however, came towards them and confirmed the latest reports. In spite of the storm, the work went on with feverish persistence, crowds of labourers were busy near the bridge and also near the station, while the rain poured down in torrents and the wind howled so fiercely that it was often impossible to hear the shouted directions of the engineers.

Nordheim alighted from his horse and approached Elmhorst, who left his post and came to meet him. Both had believed that the interview in which the tie between them had been dissolved would be a final one, but they now saw and talked with each other daily,

scarcely conscious, in the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen the railway, of any embarrassment in their relations. They knew best what there was to lose here, and a community of interest still united them closely.

"You are here on the upper stretch?" the president asked, anxiously. "And the lower——"

"Must be given up!" Wolfgang completed the sentence. "It was impossible to secure it any longer. The dikes are broken through, the bridges carried away. I have left only a few of the men to protect the stations, and have concentrated all my available force here. We must control these cataracts at all hazards."

Nordheim's uncertain glance sought first the bridge, and then the station, where a number of men were busy: "What are they doing there? You are having the house cleared out?"

"I am having the books and papers, the plans and drawings, carried to a place of security, for there is danger of an avalanche from the Wolkenstein; we have had one or two warnings."

"That too!" the president muttered, in despair; then, turning suddenly, as a thought struck him, "Good God! you do not think the bridge——?"

"No," said Wolfgang, drawing a deep breath. "The enclosed forest protects the abyss, and the bridge with it; no avalanche can break that down. I foresaw and provided for this danger when I planned it."

"It would be fearful," Nordheim groaned. "The injury even now is incalculable. Should the bridge go all is lost!"

The frown on Elmhorst's brow deepened at this outburst of despair.

"Control yourself!" he said, in a low tone, but with emphasis. "We are observed; every one is looking at us. We must set an example of courage and hope, or the people will lose heart."

"Hopes!" the president repeated, catching at the word as a drowning man clutches a straw. "Have you really any hope?"

"No; but I shall fight to the last."

Nordheim looked the speaker in the face. His pale, stern features gave no hint of the tempest raging within, and yet for him everything was at stake. After the fading of his dreams of wealth and power, his work was all that was left to him upon which to build a future if he lived, and to be at least his enduring monument if he should fall by Waltenberg's hand. It was now imperilled. And yet he stood erect and struggled on, while the president was the image of impotent despair. What did he care if others observed his hopelessness? What was it to him that an example of courage was expected from a man in his position? He thought only of the gigantic losses which the catastrophe would cause him,—losses which might ruin him.

"I must return to my post," said Wolfgang. "If you stay, choose carefully the spot where you stand. Stones and earth are continually sliding down: we have had several accidents already."

He turned again towards the bridge, and then first noticed that Nordheim had not come alone. For a moment he paused, and his glance sought Erna. He divined what had brought her hither; he knew that she feared for him, but he made no attempt to approach her, for at her side was the man to whom she belonged, who, mute and inexorable as fate itself,

considered her absolutely his property. Waltenberg marked the anxious glance of distress which followed Wolfgang as he returned to his men and took up his stand on a threatened dam, and, as if by accident, he put his hand upon the bridle of the other horse and held it fast.

Suddenly behind the pair Gronau's tall figure appeared; muddy and drenched, but entirely at his ease, he slowly approached. "Here we are," he said, with a bow. "We come directly from Oberstein, but we swam rather than walked."

"We?" asked Ernst. "Is Dr. Reinsfeld with you?"

"Yes; we succeeded at last in bringing the Obersteiners to their senses and in convincing them that their home was not in danger this time. It was a hard piece of work, and we were scarcely through with it when a messenger arrived from the engineer-in-chief to ask the doctor to come and see after some men who had been accidentally injured. The good doctor, of course, ran his fastest, and I ran too, for I thought another pair of stout arms might not come amiss, and it was well I did so. I have established myself in the house there as hospital nurse, and have just come for an instant to let you know I am here, for my hands are quite full."

"There have been accidents, then. I hope nothing serious?" Erna asked, eagerly.

Gronau shrugged his shoulders: "One of the men was carried away by a cataract and fished out in a mangled condition; the doctor is afraid he cannot pull him through; and another was struck on the head by a fragment of falling rock; his case too is serious; the others are only slightly injured."

"If Dr. Reinsfeld needs help I am ready to do all I can," the young girl declared, turning her horse as if to go to the house Gronau had pointed out.

"Thanks, Fräulein von Thurgau, we can get along very well by ourselves," Veit replied, while Waltenberg looked at his betrothed in surprise.

"What, Erna, you? There are others to do that work. Gronau is helping the doctor. Why so superfluously heroic?"

"Because I cannot endure to stand idly and unsympathetically by while every one else is toiling to the very death!"

There was a stern reproof in her words, but Ernst did not seem to understand it: "No, you certainly are not unsympathetic, you are actually trembling with emotion," he observed. "But, in fact, the men are using their utmost exertions in spite of the danger that continually threatens them."

"Because the engineer-in-chief is always foremost in peril," Veit continued the sentence. "If he were not everywhere, showing them an example of scorn of all danger, they would waver and hesitate; but such a leader inspires even the timid. There he stands in the very centre of that dam which the water may carry away at any moment, and issues his orders as if he could control the entire mountain-realm. For three days now he has been battling with this accursed Alpine fiend, who seems positively mad with fury, and I verily believe he will get the upper hand of her. But I must go back to the doctor. Good-bye."

He went, and the president, who just then returned to his companions, saw him as he vanished within-doors. He shuddered involuntarily; the appearance of this man was one more evil omen,—it reminded him

that a danger menaced him which had nothing to do with the present peril, already terrible enough.

His short conversation with Wolfgang had deprived Nordheim of the last gleam of hope. If the upper stretch of railway were destroyed, what would remain of all the buildings, the erection of which had absorbed millions, and which he could not possibly restore? He had from the beginning owned the chief part of the railway stock, and of late, in view of the enormous profit he hoped to gain upon his retirement, he had greatly increased the number of his shares, so that the tremendous loss would be his almost alone. He knew that his property, invested in many other speculations, could not stand such a blow, and if Gronau should make good his threat and accuse him publicly, all was lost. The millionaire secure in his position might perhaps have defied him, the half-ruined speculator would be overwhelmed; Nordheim knew the world in which he had lived so long.

Neither his energy nor his presence of mind stood him in stead now. The man who had for so long been the spoiled darling of Fortune, for whom everything had turned to gain, could not understand how she could suddenly prove thus false to him. He had always been a bold, clever man of business, but he had no force of character; in misfortune he was pitifully cast down. In dull, dumb despair he stood gazing at the men, at whose head the engineer-in-chief had again placed himself.

Wolfgang seemed to be everywhere; one moment he was standing on the most imperilled part of the dam, anon he breasted the tempest in the centre of the bridge, and then he hurried to the station-house to issue his orders thence. He was dripping from

head to foot,—the water was trickling from his hair, from his clothes; he did not seem to feel it, or to be in need of either rest or refreshment, and yet nothing but the most fearful tension of mind and body sustained him in the conflict which had now been going on for three times four-and-twenty hours. These were hours when Wolfgang Elmhorst might have forced even his bitterest enemies to respect and admire him.

And his mortal enemy was thus forced, but none the less did his hatred and jealousy burn fiercely. Waltenberg was familiar with danger,—he had often invoked it and dallied with it recklessly,—but there was something far beyond dalliance in the unconquerable energy with which Elmhorst thus devoted himself to duty. He knew that his was a forlorn hope; half of his work was already destroyed, he could not save the rest, and yet he worked on, seeming determined to die rather than yield.

And as he thus struggled, Ernst Waltenberg on horseback looked on at 'the very interesting spectacle,' but was conscious of the part he had condemned himself to play. He had invited Erna to ride with him to the scene of disaster; the same calculating cruelty which had tormented her by silence had dictated the proposal. He knew she would accede to it, since it would give her an opportunity to see Wolfgang again, and she should see him in the midst of the danger to which he so recklessly exposed himself, she should tremble in mortal distress, and yet never betray by a change of feature the anguish of her soul. Elmhorst was right: this man's love was mere selfishness. What was it to him that the woman he loved was tortured and in agony, if but his savage thirst for revenge were allayed? Erna should suffer as he

suffered; he would be as pitiless to her as fate had been to himself.

But he underestimated the fearless nature of his betrothed when he thought that she would merely tremble at this danger. Her eyes were indeed riveted on Wolfgang in breathless anxiety, but they flashed with passionate admiration, with proud satisfaction, on beholding how he bore himself in the conflict, how he gazed into the terrible countenance of the Alpine Fay and strove with her to the death. In this mortal struggle he was for her all hero, her whole soul went out to meet him. Every shadow which had formerly obscured his image in her heart was dispersed in this light; he stood before her, as he had confronted Nordheim, free from all shackles in the triumph of his own true nature.

Ernst was thus obliged to feel the shaft which he had shot so cruelly rebound upon himself. He had meant to show Erna the danger of the man whom she loved; he had shown her only his heroism. To be sure, he stood guard over her, determined to prevent a meeting, but he could not prevent the mute language of their eyes, the glances that sought and found each other in spite of distance and separation, of tempest and destruction, and in this language they told each other everything. Wolfgang felt that at this moment the barriers which his wooing of Alice had erected between himself and his love were levelled, and in the midst of the hopelessness of his efforts there gleamed upon him a ray of light, like the gleam of sunset indeed, but all-inspiring.

It seemed in fact as if the success of the work of salvation depended upon the presence of this man. The most dangerous of the torrents which rushed

wildly against the railway-dike had been successfully turned aside, Elnhorst having diverted its course to a deep cut in the rocks, whence it fell harmlessly into the Wolkenstein abyss, carrying with it the masses of earth and stones which had been so destructive. The most imminent danger was averted, and for the moment the tempest seemed to subside. The rain ceased, the wind became less violent, and it began to look brighter about the Wolkenstein.

There was a few minutes' pause in the work. The president and Waltenberg, who also had alighted, walked along the bridge, where some of the workmen were gathered, to observe the diverted torrent foaming in the abyss. Everything looked more hopeful.

The engineer-in-chief, however, stood on one side apart from the rest. He did not hear the cheerful exclamations of the men, but, leaning forward, seemed to listen intently to a sound muttering on high through the air, like the distant roll of thunder; his eyes were fixed upon the crest of the Wolkenstein, and suddenly his face took on a death-like pallor.

"Away from the bridge!" he shouted to the rest. "Save yourselves! Run for your lives!"

His last words were drowned in a dull rumble that grew to a crash as of thunder, but his cry of warning had been heard. The people scattered hastily; they felt the approach of something terrible,—there was no time to understand what it was; they deserted the bridge as quickly as possible.

Nordheim and Waltenberg were carried away by the rush, and the former reached firm land, but Ernst stumbled and fell while yet on the bridge. Past him and over him the others ran wildly; in the selfishness of mortal terror every one thought only of his own

safety, while Waltenberg, stunned by his fall, lay on the ground quite unable to rise for the space of a minute, when seconds were precious.

Suddenly he felt a strong arm grasp him and lift him from the ground, then bear him onward, to release him only when the stout trunk of a tree was reached, around which he could clasp his own arms to hold himself upright.

Then came the wind, howling and roaring like a hurricane,—a blast to which all that had gone before during the last three days had been but as the sighing of a breeze,—and everything in its path was prostrated or carried away. This was the herald of the Alpine Sprite, preparing a way for her; and now she herself descended from her cloud-veiled throne. A roar as of a thousand peals of thunder filled the air, echoing from every height, from every abyss, as if the entire mountain-realm were crashing to fragments; the rocks seemed to tremble, the earth to rock, as this terrible something, white and phantom-like, thundered past. It lasted for a minute, and then there was silence,—a silence as of death.

The avalanche had torn its way from the peak of the mountain directly into the abyss, and destruction marked its course. The extensive, protecting, enclosed forest at the foot of the cliffs had vanished, and where it had stood there was a desolate, dreary waste. The course of the stream was blockaded; the chasm was half filled with jagged masses of ice, from among which projected trunks of trees and huge fragments of stone, and where the bridge had thrown its bold arch from rock to rock now yawned sheer emptiness. Two of the huge shafts were still standing, the rest were partly or entirely torn down, and about them

hung some of the iron ribs, bent and snapped like reeds; all the rest lay below in the abyss. She had avenged herself, the savage Alpine Fay. Crushed and splintered at her feet lay the proud creation of man.

CHAPTER XXV.

NOT ALL DESPAIR.

A SCENE of indescribable confusion followed upon the catastrophe. At first no one fully grasped what had occurred, and when at last it became clear, all rushed to the rescue. The warning shout of the engineer-in-chief had indeed averted the worst,—at the instant of its destruction no one had been upon the bridge; but some of the men lay senseless, thrown to the ground by the concussion of the air, others had been more or less injured by flying stones and bits of ice; no one, however, at first seemed mortally hurt, and all who were able were intent upon aid. There were shouts and cries, and a running to and fro in wild confusion. Very few preserved their presence of mind, and these few could not make themselves heard.

One group, however, assembled about a severely wounded man, was quiet enough, and in a few moments this group became a centre of attraction. Engineers and workmen crowded around with faces of dismay, a whisper ran from lip to lip, "The president? Nordheim himself? For God's sake bring the doctor!"

It was indeed President Nordheim who lay here bleeding and unconscious. He had reached what he thought a place of safety, when one of the heavy iron

stanchions of the bridge, torn from its place, had felled him to the earth. Erna and Waltenberg were busied about him, and all were doing what they could to restore him to consciousness, when the circle opened to admit the engineer-in-chief and Dr. Reinsfeld.

Benno was rather paler than usual, but perfectly calm, as he knelt down and began to examine the injury. The pain of this examination seemed to rouse Nordheim; with a groan he opened his eyes, and gazed into the countenance of the man bending over him. He did not recognize him, but probably fancied he saw his early friend, whom the son closely resembled, for with an unmistakable expression of horror and a convulsive movement he tried to rise and to push aside the helping hand. With another agonized groan he sank back, the blood gushing from his mouth.

The by-standers observed only the signs of physical pain. Benno alone divined the truth; he bent still lower, and as he gently put his hand beneath the sufferer's head he said, softly, "Do not reject my help. It is given you freely, from my heart!"

Nordheim was unable to speak, and the effort he had made exhausted him; again he became unconscious. The young physician examined with all possible gentleness the injury in the breast, and then turned with a very grave face to Waltenberg and Elmhurst.

"You have no hope?" the latter asked, in an undertone.

"No, nothing can avail here. We must try to get him home; he may reach the house alive if he is carried with extreme caution. Fräulein von Thurgau, will you kindly go first and prepare his daughter, that the shock may not be too great? We must not conceal

from her that her father is dying; he cannot possibly live until to-morrow."

Then he gave the necessary directions. A litter was hastily constructed, and the wounded man was laid upon it with infinite care. Stout arms were ready to aid, and the sad procession slowly took its way towards the villa. Erna preceded it, and Reinsfeld, promising to follow immediately, turned his attention to the other wounded men who required his skill, although none of them were mortally injured.

Waltenberg too stayed behind. He paused, hesitating and seeming engaged in an inward struggle, but when he saw the engineer-in-chief walk towards the Wolkenstein chasm he followed, and overtook him.

"Herr Elmhurst!"

Wolfgang turned; his face was unnaturally calm, and there was a hard ring in his voice as he said, "You come to remind me of my promise? I am at your service at any hour; my duties are at an end."

Ernst had entertained no such intention; he made a gesture of dissent: "I think neither of us is in the mood to pursue our quarrel at present. I am sure that you, at least, are not fit for it."

Elmhurst passed his hand across his brow; now when the terrible tension of his nerves had relaxed he first perceived how utterly exhausted he was.

"You are probably right," he said, with the same rigid, unnatural look. "It comes from overwork. I have not slept for three nights; but a couple of hours' rest will restore me entirely, and, as I said, I am at your service."

Ernst silently gazed into the face of the man who had just lost his all; this forced calm did not mislead him. A reply was upon his lips, but he suppressed

it, and his glance wandered to the spot where he had been thrown down in his flight. Just there one of the columns had fallen, and the iron part of it was buried deep in the earth. There he would have lain crushed and mangled but for the hand which had rescued him from destruction; perhaps he was not as unconscious as he seemed of whose the hand was.

"I must go and see how the president is," he said, hurriedly. "Dr. Reinsfeld has promised to stay with us to-night, and we will send you word of what happens."

"Thanks," said Wolfgang, seeming both to hear and to speak merely mechanically: his thoughts were elsewhere; and when Waltenberg turned away, he slowly walked on to the place where the Wolkenstein bridge had stood.

The night that ensued was a terrible one for the family and household at the villa. Its master lay struggling with death, which seemed slow to come in the midst of such agony. Incapable of motion or of speech, but entirely conscious, he knew that the son of the former friend whom he had deceived and betrayed, condemning him to a life of poverty and hardship, while he himself enjoyed wealth and distinction as the fruits of his treachery, was unwearied in his efforts to minister to him, to soothe the death-bed from which he could not dismiss the dark messenger. Nothing could be more ready and unselfish than the aid afforded by Benno, and this very forgetfulness of self awakened the dying man's most pungent remorse. Face to face with death falsehood and deceit vanished, truth alone showed its inexorable countenance, and the effect was annihilating. The agonized struggle lasted, it is true, but for a single night, but in that

time were compressed the torture of a lifetime and the penance of a lifetime.

When day at last dawned in mist and clouds, struggle and agony were at an end, and it was Benno Reinsfeld's hand that closed the dying man's eyes. Then he gently raised from her knees Alice, who was sobbing beside her father's body, and led her away. He spoke no word of love or hope to her,—it would have seemed like desecration to him in such a moment,—but the way in which he put his arm around her and supported her showed plainly that he now claimed his right, and that nothing could part them more. He never could have been a son to the man who had so wronged his father, but that would now be spared him if Alice should become his wife; the wealth also which had been the fruit of treachery had mainly vanished. All barriers between the lovers had fallen.

Erna also, when all was over, retired to her room. Alice did not need her: she had a better comforter beside her.

The girl sat pale and worn at the window, looking out into the gray, misty morning. Alien as her uncle had seemed to her, harshly as she had often judged him, the suffering of his last hours had obliterated every thought of him in her mind save that it was her mother's brother who lay dying.

Her thoughts now, however, were not with the dead, but with the living, with him who was perhaps standing in the dim dawn beside the ruins of his work. She knew what it had been to him, and felt the blow with him. Erna would have given her life to be able to stand beside him now with words of consolation and encouragement, and instead she must know him alone in his despair. She paid no heed to Griff, who

had crept up to her and laid his head in her lap with sorrowful sympathy in his brown eyes; she gazed out fixedly into the rolling mist.

The door opened softly; Waltenberg entered and slowly approached his betrothed, who, sunk in a revery, did not perceive him until he stood beside her and uttered her name.

When Waltenberg thus addressed her she started with an involuntary expression of terror and dislike, which did not escape him; his smile was bitterly sad.

"Are you so afraid of me? You must endure the intrusion, however, for I have something to say to you."

"Now? at this moment, when death has just crossed our threshold?"

"Precisely now; if I wait I may—lose courage to speak."

The words sounded so strange that Erna looked up, surprised. Her eyes encountered his, but did not find there the gleam which had so terrified her of late. In his dark look there glowed somewhat which was neither all love nor all hatred,—perhaps a combination of both,—she could not tell.

"Go on, then," she said, wearily. "I will listen."

He paused and looked fixedly at her, and at last said, with slow emphasis, "I come to bid you farewell."

"You are going? Now, before my uncle has been laid to rest?"

"Yes,—and never to return! You mistake me, Erna. This is no farewell for days or weeks; it means that we are parting forever."

"Parting?" The girl looked at him incredulously, only half comprehending his words; they came upon her too suddenly for her to grasp all their meaning.

"You evidently have no belief in my magnanimity,"

Ernst said, harshly. "It is true that yesterday I could more easily have annihilated you both, you and your Wolfgang, than have given you back your troth. That is over. He has taught me how to subdue an enemy. Do you think I do not know whose hand it was that snatched me from a terrible death yesterday? Without its aid I should have been crushed at the entrance of the bridge. You saw it,—I know that,—and will only the more worship your hero, whom you watched yesterday with an enthusiasm that transfigured you. This deed of his exalts him to an ideal hero in your eyes. What am I in them?"

"Yes, I saw it," Erna said, looking down, "but I did not think you recognized him, stunned as you were, and in the general confusion."

"A mortal enemy is always recognized, even while he is saving one's life. I tried to thank him yesterday, just after the catastrophe, but I could not bring my lips to frame words of gratitude to that man; they would have choked me. Let him hear them from you. Tell him that I revoke my challenge, and that I release him from his promise, as I release you from yours. Now we are quits,—more than quits: I give him what is tenfold dearer to me than the life he saved for me."

Erna had grown very pale in the certainty of what she had long suspected: "You challenged him? That was the meaning of your interview?"

"Do you suppose that I could have borne to know him happy in your arms?" Waltenberg asked. "But for what happened yesterday I would have shot him down like a dog; and he promised to be at my service as soon as the Wolkenstein bridge was completed. Fate has released him from his promise."

The bitterness in his tone no longer affected Erna;

she heard only the anguish in his voice, felt only what the renunciation was costing his passionate nature. In gentle entreaty she laid her hand upon his arm: "Ernst, trust me, I know the full extent of the sacrifice you are making for me. You have loved me intensely——"

"Yes, and I was fool enough to fancy that passion such as mine *must* force you to love in return. I thought that if I carried you to another quarter of the globe, and put an ocean between you and Wolfgang Elmhorst, you would learn to forget, and to turn to the husband beside you. I have learned my error. I never could have torn that love from your heart; if I had killed him you would have loved him dead. Now, in his misery, your whole soul flies out to him. Go to him. I am no longer in your way. You are free!"

"Let us go together," Erna entreated, earnestly. "Offer him your hand in amity; you can, for you are now the generous one, the benefactor. It is you whom we have to thank."

He thrust aside her hand: "No, I never will meet that man again. If I should see him I could not answer for myself, all the fiends within me would break loose once more. You cannot dream what it has cost me to conjure them down; let them rest."

Erna did not venture to repeat her request; she comprehended that so passionate a nature might renounce, but could not forgive. She bowed her head in mute acquiescence.

"Farewell!" said Ernst, still in the harsh, hostile tone which had characterized him throughout the interview. "Forget me. It will be easy at his side."

She looked up to him; her eyes filled with tears: "I never shall forget you, Ernst, never! But I shall

always remember sadly that you left me in bitterness and hatred."

"In hatred?" he exclaimed, with an outburst of passion, and suddenly Erna felt herself clasped in his arms, pressed to his heart, while his kisses were rained upon her hair, her brow, with the same wild intensity of tenderness which she had so dreaded and which had always failed to arouse in her the least return of his affection. This time there was in his caress something of the madness of despair. He tore himself away and was gone. The short, stormy dream of the love of his life was over forever!

Meanwhile, the day had fairly appeared. The rain had ceased in the night, and the wind was not so violent,—the wild uproar of nature had begun to subside.

The work of the previous day still went on, however, although, since the Wolkenstein bridge was gone, there was little more to save. This last blow had been the heaviest, although the entire railway had been incalculably injured; very few of the numerous bridges and structures were not in need of repairs, and, in view of the general destruction, the completion of the undertaking seemed impossible. Its author lay dead in his house, and the intended transfer of the railway to the company was of course impossible. How and when, if ever, others would come forward to carry out his schemes time alone could show.

Such were probably the thoughts occurring to the mind of the man standing alone on the brink of the Wolkenstein chasm and gazing down at the ruin below him. The autumn morning was very cold; in the valleys and depths wreaths of gray mist were curling, long trains of clouds hovered about the mountains, and a gloomy sky looked down upon the wet, sodden

earth, which bore melancholy traces of the turmoil of the previous day. Uprooted and broken trees, fragments of rock, mud, and heaps of stones were everywhere to be seen, and in many a spot the traces could be perceived of the gallant struggle of man in his fight with the elements. The roar of the cataract was not so threatening as it had been, but it still filled the air as the water dashed from the height, and the wind had not yet left the dripping storm-tossed forests in peace.

In the Wolkenstein chasm alone there was a silence as of the grave. A gigantic glacier seemed to rest in its depths, its rigid whiteness broken by a chaotic mass of rock and earth. The avalanche which had begun on the crest of the Wolkenstein must have increased fearfully on its way, for it had prostrated the entire enclosed forest, hitherto regarded as a sure protection; pines a century old had been snapped like straws and had dragged with them into the abyss a portion of the mountain-side. And then the entire mass of ice and snow, of rocks and trunks of trees, its force augmented tenfold by the velocity of its fall, had hurled itself against the bridge and crushed it. No human structure could withstand such an onslaught.

It was some consolation to know this, but Wolfgang Elmhorst seemed to find no comfort in such reflections. He gazed dully down into the icy grave where all his schemes and hopes were lying, perhaps never to rise again. In the beginning, when the railway had first been planned, there had been objections made to the Wolkenstein bridge because of the cost of its erection. It had been proposed to avoid the chasm and to carry the line of railway by another less expensive but roundabout road. Nordheim, however, who was attracted by the boldness of the scheme, contrived to

overbear all opposition and to have his own way. In future there could be no thought, since economy would be especially necessary, of rebuilding the bridge, which, moreover, must be condemned as impossible, since it had fallen a prey to the elements just when it was about to astonish and delight all who beheld it, and to bring reputation and fame to its deviser.

Suddenly a large, lion-like dog came careering over the sodden ground, testifying by huge leaps to his delight at being released from his long confinement in-doors. He paused close beside Elmhurst, and began, after his custom with the engineer-in-chief, to show his teeth, when for the first time his show of dislike was arrested,—something else attracted his attention. Wise dog that he was, he perceived what had occurred. He grew restless, stretched his head far over the edge of the abyss, then looked towards the other side, finally turning his intelligent dark eyes upon the engineer in-chief as if to ask what it all meant.

Hitherto Wolfgang had preserved his composure, at least externally, but he broke down at the dog's mute inquiry. He covered his eyes with his hand, and a tear, the first he had shed since boyhood, rolled down his cheek.

On a sudden he heard his name uttered in a voice not unfamiliar to him, but in a tone such as had never before fallen upon his ear: "Wolfgang!"

He turned, dashed aside the treacherous witness from his cheek, and, entirely self-possessed once more, approached the slender figure, enveloped in a dark wrap, and standing at a little distance, as though afraid to venture nearer.

"You here, Erna? After the terrible night that you have passed?"

"Yes, it was terrible!" the girl said, with a deep-drawn sigh. "You have heard that my uncle is dead?"

"I heard it two hours ago. I no longer had the right to watch beside his death-bed; moreover, the sight of me would only have distressed him, so I kept away. How does Alice bear it?"

"For the moment she seems stunned, but Dr. Reinsfeld is with her."

"Then she will recover from the blow. They love each other, and with the one who is loved best in the world beside you even the worst trials can be borne."

Erna made no reply, but she slowly approached and stood beside him. He looked at her, and his sad face grew still darker: "I know why you are here. You would fain speak some word of sympathy, of consolation to me. But why? Your dying father's curse has borne fruit: the destruction of the ancestral home of the Thurgaus is avenged, and I think even the Freiherr would be content."

"Can you really attach such importance to words which were the result of anger,—of the agitation preceding a sudden death?" Erna asked, reproachfully. "Since when have you been superstitious?"

"Since faith in my own power has lain buried there. Leave me to myself, Erna. What comfort can I take in the sympathy which you offer as an alms, to express which you must have stolen secretly away, and for which you may have to suffer from Herr Waltenberg's reproaches? I need no sympathy, not even from you." In the irritability of misery he turned away and looked up at the Wolkenstein, the crest of which loomed white and shadowy through the clouds. It alone seemed striving to unveil, while a thick mist obscured all the surrounding mountain-tops.

"I do not come secretly, nor to offer you an alms," Erna said, in a voice which she tried vainly to steady. "Ernst knows that I have come to you, and he sends a message by me."

"Ernst Waltenberg—to me?"

"To you, Wolfgang! He bids me tell you that he releases you from your promise, and recalls his challenge."

Elmhorst frowned darkly, as he rejoined, "Has he told *you* of all that? Very considerate on his part! Such matters are generally discussed among men exclusively. But, although I accepted his conditions, I do not accept his magnanimity,—least of all at present."

"And yet you first set him the example of magnanimity. No need to deny it. He knows as well as I do whose hand snatched him from destruction on this very spot."

"I leave no one to die if it is in my power to save his life, even if he be my worst enemy," Wolfgang said, coldly. "At such moments one obeys the instincts of humanity, never stopping to consider, and I refuse to accept his gratitude. I pray you say this to Herr Waltenberg, since he has chosen you, Fräulein von Thurgau, for his messenger."

"Can you really treat his messenger thus harshly?" The girl's voice was low and gentle and her large dark-blue eyes were strangely bright as she looked at the man who could no longer control the anguish of his soul.

"Why torture me with such looks and tones?" he cried, passionately. "You belong to another——"

"Whom you misunderstand as I did. I know now how immense is the sacrifice he makes for me, for I know how great was his love for me, when, with this

love in his heart, he could give me back my freedom and bid me farewell forever."

Wolfgang, half stunned at the unexpected announcement, could only be conscious that through the black night of his hopeless despair a dazzling ray of light was darting, heralding the dawn of new life and energy. "You are free, Erna?" he broke forth. "And now—now you come——"

"To you. It is so heavy a burden,—this misery that you are bearing alone. I claim my share."

The words were spoken with earnest simplicity, as if they were mere words of course; but Elmhurst changed colour and his look was downcast. He was undergoing a hard struggle with his pride, which felt such devotion at such a moment to be a humiliation.

"No, no, not yet!" he murmured, with an attempt to turn away. "Let me recover my courage,—my self-possession. I cannot accept your sacrifice. It weighs me down to the earth."

"Wolf!"—the old pet name of his boyhood, which he had heard from none save Benno since that time, came soft and low from the girl's lips,—“Wolf, you need me most now! You need a love to encourage and nerve you; never heed the promptings of false pride. You once asked me if I could have stayed beside you on the lonely, rough path leading to success. I come to bring you your answer. You shall not pursue it alone; I will stay beside you through struggle and labour, through hardship and peril. If you have lost faith in your power and your future, I believe in them most firmly. I believe wholly in you!"

She looked up at him with a beaming, triumphant smile. All his hesitation vanished: he opened his arms and clasped his love to his heart.

Griff meanwhile looked on at this development of affairs in extreme amazement and evident dissatisfaction. He did not quite comprehend it all, but thus much was clear,—he must give up all thoughts in future of growling and showing his teeth at the engineer-in-chief, who was holding his young mistress in his arms and kissing her, and Griff was much annoyed. He preferred meanwhile to maintain an expectant attitude, and so he lay down and kept a constant watch upon the pair.

The mists were still floating about the Wolkenstein, but its peak was every minute emerging more clearly. It did not now unveil as in the dreamy moonlight of the mysteriously lovely midsummer-eve; it stood forth white, icy, and phantom-like; above it the heavens heavy with rain, about it storm and clouds, and at its feet the desolation which itself had wrought. And yet from that very desolation there had sprung forth the purest, truest happiness,—happiness grown to life amid tempests and storms.

Wolfgang released his love from his embrace and stood erect, all trace of despair vanished from his face and figure. It had come back to him,—the joy which he had thought flown forever, and with it had returned the old courage, the old inexhaustible energy.

“You are right, my darling!” he exclaimed. “I will not doubt, nor hesitate. I will conquer her yet, that evil Force up there. She has destroyed my work. I will create it afresh!”

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE KISS OF THE ALPINE FAY.

THE Nordheim villa was silent and deserted. The president's remains had been transported to the capital and buried thence, and the entire household had removed thither.

The engineer-in-chief also was in the capital, to consult with the company which was part owner of the railway, and to arrange the affairs of the deceased president,—a difficult task, which he had voluntarily undertaken, being justified in the eyes of the world in so doing, since the dissolution of his betrothal to Alice had not yet been made public. The time given to mourning must pass before any such announcement could be made, and then Alice would no longer need his aid. At present it was above all desirable to avert the gossip and curiosity sure to ensue upon the catastrophe which had caused the president's sudden death, and which had greatly diminished his wealth. A strong arm was needed to save what remained.

Ernst Waltenberg was still in Heilborn. Since the day when he had bidden farewell to his betrothed he had held aloof from the Wolkenstein district, but something appeared to retain him in its vicinity. The late autumn had set in with unusual severity, and the popular watering-place was, of course, quite empty but for the foreign gentleman, with his secretary and servants, who did not as yet talk of departure.

Veit Gronau was pacing to and fro the drawing-room of the comfortable cottage which Waltenberg

occupied, his face filled with anxiety, and glancing from time to time towards the closed door of the next room,—Ernst's study.

"If I could only tell what to make of it all!" he muttered. "He locks himself in there day after day, and it is a week now since he set foot in the open air; he who for years has passed two or three hours in the saddle daily. If I could but get at Reinsfeld; but with his usual conscientiousness he has gone to Neuenfeld, and will not leave it until his first term of office has expired, when it is to be hoped a successor will have been provided for the post. There will surely be enough of the Nordheim millions left to insure him an easy existence when he marries his betrothed, and he would have been far wiser to remain near her now. Here you are at last, Said. What does Herr Waltenberg say?"

"The master begs Herr Gronau to dine without him," the negro replied.

"This will never do!" exclaimed Veit; but as he walked towards the door of the next room with some vague intention of forcing it, it opened, and Waltenberg himself appeared.

"You here yet, Gronau?" he said, with a slight frown. "I begged you to dine without me."

"I am like yourself, Herr Waltenberg. I have no appetite."

"Then, Said, have the table cleared. Go!"

Said obeyed, but Gronau, although he saw plainly that he too was dismissed, obstinately maintained his post.

Ernst had gone to the window, whence there was an extended view of the distant range of mountains. During the entire week that had elapsed since the

avalanche had occurred the weather had not cleared; it had been dull and stormy, and the mountains, day after day, were veiled. To-day, for the first time, they showed themselves clearly.

"It is clearing up—at last!" Ernst said, more to himself than to his companion, who shook his head dubiously.

"It will not last long. Fine weather never does when the outlines of the mountains are so distinct and the crests seem so near."

Ernst did not at once reply,—he stood gazing steadily at the blue distance; but after two or three minutes he said, "I want to drive to Oberstein to-morrow; order the carriage, if you please."

Gronau looked at him, surprised: "To Oberstein? Do you intend making an excursion?"

"Yes; I wish to ascend the Wolkenstein."

"You mean to the cliffs."

"No, to the summit."

"Now? At this season? It is impossible, Herr Waltenberg. You know the summit has always been inaccessible."

"That is the very reason why it attracts me. I have stayed on here to make the ascent, but I could do nothing in the weather we have had. Get me a couple of competent guides——"

"There are none such to be had for the ascent you speak of," Gronau gravely interrupted him.

"Why not? Because of that old nurse's tale? Offer the men a large sum of money; 'tis a sure cure for superstition."

"Possibly; but it might well fail here, for the old nurse's tale has a background of indubitable reality, as we have seen. The avalanche and the ruin it

wrought are too fresh in the memory of the mountaineers."

"Yes, it wrought ruin indeed," Ernst said, dreamily, still gazing towards the mountains.

"And therefore let the Wolkenstein alone for the present," Veit entreated. "This clearing up of the skies is not going to last, I assure you. We cannot undertake the feat now."

Ernst shrugged his shoulders: "I did not ask you to go with me. Stay at home if you are afraid, Gronau."

Veit's brown face showed irritation, but he controlled himself: "We have surely shared enough of adventure together, Herr Waltenberg, to set your mind at rest with regard to my timidity. I will go with you to the extent of what is possible; you, I fear, mean to go farther, and your mood is not one to enable you to encounter danger coolly."

"You are mistaken; my mood is excellent, and I am going to make this ascent, with or without guides; if needs must I will go alone."

Gronau was familiar with this tone, and knew that there was nothing to be done in opposition to it; nevertheless he made one last attempt. He supposed that there would be an outbreak, but he determined to speak: "Remember your promise. You promised Baroness Thurgau to avoid the Wolkenstein."

Ernst started: his change of colour, the flash of menace in his eyes, betrayed how he suffered by the touch upon his bleeding wound; but in a moment he had shrouded himself in a frigid composure that forbade all further discussion.

"The circumstances under which I made that promise no longer exist. Moreover, I must entreat that all

allusion to them in my presence be avoided for the future."

He went to his room, turning upon the threshold to say, "At eight o'clock to-morrow morning you will have the carriage ready for a drive to Oberstein."

* * * * *

Upon a snow-field in face of the peak of the Wolkenstein a small group of bold mountain-climbers were assembled, who had undertaken the ascent, and had actually accomplished the greater part of it,—the two guides, muscular, weather-beaten mountaineers, and Veit Gronau. They were provided with ropes, axes, and every accessory of a mountain-ascent, and were evidently taking a prolonged rest here.

They had left Oberstein on the previous day and had climbed to the borders of the limitless waste of rocks, where was a hut, in which they had taken shelter for the night, and then with the first dawn of morning they had attacked the cliff hitherto pronounced inaccessible. With persistent pains, with indescribable exertions, and with reckless contempt of the danger that threatened them at every step, they had scaled it. It had been ascended for the first time!

This consciousness, however, was the only reward of their success, for the weather, which had hitherto been tolerably clear, had changed within an hour or two. Thick mist filled the valleys, obscuring the outlook, and the crests only of the surrounding mountains were visible. The peak of the Wolkenstein, itself a mighty pyramid of ice rising sheer above them, was gradually disappearing. Gronau's field-glass was directed steadily to this pyramid, and the two guides exchanged a few monosyllabic remarks, while their grave faces showed their anxiety.

"I can see nothing more," said Veit, at last, taking the glass from his eyes. "The peak is veiled in mist; nothing can be distinguished any longer."

"That mist is snow," said one of the guides, an elderly man with grizzled hair. "I told the gentleman it was coming, but he would not listen to me."

"Yes, it was madness to attempt the ascent under such circumstances," Gronau muttered. "I should have thought we had done enough in surmounting this cliff. It was a terrific piece of climbing; few will ever venture to follow us, and it never has been done before."

Meanwhile, the younger guide had kept a sharp lookout in all directions; he now approached and said, "We can wait no longer, Herr; we must return."

"Without Herr Waltenberg? Upon no account!" Gronau declared.

The man shrugged his shoulders: "Only as far as the snow-barrow, where we can find shelter beneath the rocks, if it comes to the worst. Up here we could never stand against the snow, and we must descend the worst part of the cliff before it comes, or not one of us will get down alive. We agreed to wait for the gentleman at the snow-barrow."

Such had, in fact, been the agreement when Waltenberg separated from the party. The guides who had been prevailed upon to undertake the expedition by the offer of three times their usual fee had brought the two strangers successfully to the top of the cliff. Here they had positively refused to go farther, not because their courage failed them,—the summit lying directly before them was probably less dangerous to climb than the steep, almost perpendicular cliff they had already scaled,—but the experienced mountaineers

well knew what those grayish-white clouds foreboded which were beginning to assemble, at first as light as hovering mist. They begged for an immediate return, and Gronau seconded their entreaties, but in vain.

Ernst saw directly before him the summit he had so longed to attain, and no warning, no entreaty, availed to alter his determination to proceed. He insisted upon the completion of his daring attempt with all the obstinacy of a nature that held cheaply his own life, as well as the lives of others. The threatening skies did not move him, and the refusal of the guides to accompany him only roused his antagonism. With a sneer at their caution when the goal was all but attained he left them.

Gronau had kept his word; he had gone with him to the extent of what was possible, but when that was reached, when the risk was madness,—a provoking of fate,—he had remained behind, and yet he was regretting that he had done so. The climber had been visible for a while as he toiled upward, until near the summit all trace of him through the field-glass had been lost, because of the mists which gathered quickly and heavily.

“We must go down,” the elder guide said, resolutely. “If the gentleman comes back he will find us beside the snow-barrow. We shall do him no good by staying here, and we risk our lives by losing time.”

Gronau saw the justice of the man’s words, and shut up his glass with a sigh.

* * * * *

The wavering masses of mist grew thicker and darker; they floated upward from all the valleys, sailed forth from every cleft, and veiled forests and peaks in their damp mantle. The precipices of the

Wolkenstein, the sheer gigantic stretch of its rocky walls, vanished in the rolling fog,—the ice-pyramid of its peak alone stood forth clear and distinct.

And aloft upon this summit stood the man who had persisted and had accomplished what had been deemed impossible. His dress bore traces of his fearful toil, his hands were bleeding from the jagged points of ice by which he had held to swing himself up, but he stood where no human foot save his own had ever trod. He had dared to ascend the cloudy throne of the Alpine Fay, to lift her veil and to look the sovereign of this icy realm in the face.

And her face was beautiful! But its beauty was wild and phantom-like: there was in it no trace of earth, and it dazzled with a painful splendour the eyes of the undaunted adventurer. Around him and below him was naught save ice and snow,—rigid white glaciers riven and billowy but gleaming with fairy-like brilliancy. The crevasses gave back here the greenish hue of spring and there the deep blue of ocean, and the dazzling white of the jagged, snow-covered crests reflected a thousand prismatic dyes, while above it all arched a sky of such clear azure that it was as if it would fain pour forth all its fulness of light upon the old legendary throne of the mountains, the crystal palace of the Alpine Fay.

Ernst drew deep, long breaths: for the first time in many days the weight that had so burdened his spirit vanished; the world, with its loves and hates, its struggles and conflicts, lay far below him; it disappeared in the misty sea that filled the valleys and buried beneath it meadows and forest and the habitations of men. The mountain-peaks alone emerged, like islands in a measureless ocean. Here appeared a

couple of dark crests of rock, there a peak of dazzling snow, and there a distant range. But they all looked unreal, bodiless, floating and sailing upon the flood which heaved and undulated as it slowly rose higher and higher. Over it brooded the silence of death: life was extinct in this realm of eternal ice.

And yet a warm, passionate human heart was throbbing in this waste, fain to flee from the world and its woe, seeking forgetfulness here, but bringing its woe with it. So long as danger strained every nerve, so long as there was a goal to be attained, the haunting misery of his soul had been stilled. The old magic draught which Ernst had so often quaffed had not lost its charm; danger and enjoyment indissolubly linked, the spell of magnificent nature, and the unfettered freedom again his own, were all-powerful to stir him. Again he felt the intoxicating force of the draught, and in the midst of this icy waste he was seized with a burning longing for those lands of sunshine and light where only he had been truly at home. There he could forget and recover,—there he could again live and be happy.

The misty sea rose higher and higher; slowly, noiselessly, but steadily, one peak after another vanished beneath the gray, mysterious flood, which, like a deluge, swallowed up everything belonging to earth. The ice-pyramid of the Wolkenstein alone still stood forth, but its gleaming splendour had vanished with the vanished sunlight.

The solitary dreamer suddenly shuddered as if from the chill of an icy breath. He looked up; the blue above him had faded: he saw only white mist, which began to veil everything near at hand.

Ernst had been abundantly warned by the guides:

he knew this sign; with danger the tension of his nerves returned; it was high time to retrace his steps. He began the descent, slowly, cautiously, testing every step as he had done in climbing up, but the mist barred his way everywhere and chilled him to the bone. Nevertheless, he pursued his downward path steadily, the traces of his ascent in the snow guiding him; at last, however, he was forced to search for them, and more than once he lost them. The effects of his over-exertion began also to assert themselves.

His breath came short and in gasps, the moisture stood out upon his forehead, and his sight grew uncertain. Conscious of this, he roused himself to greater efforts. He had challenged the danger, he would not succumb to it, the old nurse's tale should not come true, and his force of will was again victorious. He traversed the terrible path for the second time, and panting, gasping, half frozen, half dead from fatigue, he finally reached the foot of the pyramid, and stood upon the glacier summit of the cliff.

The hardest part of his task was over. True, there was still the sheer descent of the cliff to achieve, but steps had been hewn in the ice by the ascending party, and ropes had been left at the worst places to help in the descent. Ernst knew that he should find these aids; in spite of the fog, they would guide him to the snow-barrow, where his companions awaited him.

Then forth from the mist it hovered white and glistening, like fluttering veils softly touching cheek and brow in a gentle caress,—the snow had begun to fall. And in a few minutes the caressing touch was transformed to an oppressive, stifling embrace which it was vain to try to escape. Ernst staggered forward, then turned back, but the icy arms were everywhere:

they robbed him of breath and froze the blood in his veins. One short, desperate struggle, and they held him in an indissoluble clasp,—he sank on the ground.

But with the struggle the distress too ceased. How delicious to fall asleep thus, so mortally weary that dream and reality mingled and melted into each other! Again he was standing on the summit in the sunlight, beholding the palace of ice in all its enchanted splendour, and gazing into the unveiled countenance of the Alpine Fay, whose pallid beauty no mortal might look upon and live. Yet her face was not that of a stranger. He knew those features, and the fathomless blue of the eyes that beamed and smiled upon him as never before. The image of the woman whom he had loved so wildly, so inexpressibly, did not leave him even upon the threshold of death, but stole softly upon the last gleams of his consciousness.

Then the sea of mist slowly rose higher and higher until all else was overwhelmed; the beloved face alone still showed faint and dreamlike through the gray veil, till finally it too faded, and the dreamer was borne onward by this sea of mist stretching endless and shoreless out into the immeasurable distance,—on into eternity.

CHAPTER XXVII.

MIDSUMMER EVE AGAIN.

ALMOST three years had passed since the terrible avalanche wrought such ruin, and glorious sunshine made glad the hearts of the mountaineers on the day preceding Midsummer-eve,—the day of the festival

celebrating throughout the Wolkenstein district the opening of the new mountain-railway. All the villages on the line of travel, now promoted to the dignity of railway-stations, were gaily decked with green wreaths and fluttering flags, and crowds of mountaineers in their Sunday costumes had come from far and near among the mountains to behold with curiosity and wonder the arrival of the first train. The iron road, at last completed, was to bring prosperity to their secluded valleys.

At first, when the terrible catastrophe still struck terror to the minds of all who heard of it, there had been a doubt as to whether the upper stretch of the railway, that passing through the Wolkenstein district, could ever be completed. Consultations with the company had gone on for months, until finally the energy and persistence of the engineer-in-chief had been victorious: the work had been taken up once more, and it was now happily concluded.

Station Oberstein, situated near the village itself, at the end of the Wolkenstein bridge, was especially conspicuous in its decorations. The train, bringing the engineer-in-chief and his wife, with the directors of the road, and a number of invited guests, was to make a stop here, and a particularly grand reception had been devised. The crowds from the country around were greater here than elsewhere, and cannon were to be fired from a neighbouring height.

In the midst of the gay multitude Veit Gronau's tall figure was conspicuous. He looked more tanned and weather-beaten than ever, but otherwise was unchanged. Ernst Waltenberg had provided generously in his will for his former secretary; he was free to live as he chose, but the old love of a wandering life had

driven him forth into the world again, and after nearly three years' of absence he had returned for another glimpse of his European home.

"And so Dr. Reinsfeld is to give a grand dinner in his villa to the directors," he said to himself, as he stood on the railway-platform looking out for the train. "I am really curious to see how my good Benno conducts himself as a millionaire. Probably he is quite uncomfortable; but he will have to get used to it, for Gersdorf wrote to me that a million had been rescued out of the wreck of Nordheim's colossal fortune."

"There it comes!" The shout interrupted his reflections; the crowd pressed forward eagerly and stretched their necks to see the first train, which came gliding from the depths upon the narrow iron road. It vanished for a few moments in the tunnel below Oberstein, and then, appearing once more, rolled smoothly onward, the smoke from the gaily-decorated locomotive floating backward like a pennon. Anon it thundered over the bridge, and was greeted at the Oberstein station by a burst of music, by loud shouts of welcome, and by the cannon-shots from the height, wakening the echoes from all the mountains around.

The train was emptied at the station, but almost half an hour elapsed before the party could drive to the villa, for first of all the glory of the road, the Wolkenstein bridge, had to be inspected. The bold, gigantic structure had arisen from ruin; as proudly as before it spanned the chasm from rock to rock. Below it in the giddy depths rushed the stream with all its old impetuosity, and above it the Wolkenstein reared its mighty crest aloft, wearing to-day a light crown of clouds. But upon the declivity, where before had stood the enclosed forest, there was now a broad, solid wall

of masonry, a sure protection against any repetition of the former disaster.

The engineer-in-chief, with his young wife on his arm, acted as guide to the inspecting party. Of course he was the hero of the day, and was overwhelmed on all sides by congratulations and expressions of admiration. He received them gravely, seeming but little elated by them.

Erna, on the other hand, was beaming with happiness and gratified pride; her eyes sparkled as she listened to all that was said to her husband, and she had a kindly word and a friendly greeting for all who pressed forward to welcome her.

The pair were obliged to do the honours of the new road without the aid of Dr. Reinsfeld, who, as husband of the late president's heiress, was a very important personage on this occasion, but quite averse to performing his duties as such. He no longer wore the antique coat and saffron-coloured gloves in which he had made acquaintance with the invalid Alice; his attire was faultless, but nevertheless it was easy to see that his task for the day was held by him to be very difficult of performance. He confined himself to bowing and shaking hands, keeping as much as possible in the background, when suddenly a familiar voice accosted him: "Does Dr. Reinsfeld do me the honour to remember me?"

"Veit Gronau!" exclaimed the doctor, delightedly, offering his hand. "Then you received our invitation in time. But why did you not let us know you had arrived, so that you might have come in the train with us?"

"I came by the way of Heilborn, and was just in time to receive you. I congratulate you, Benno, upon your share in this occasion."

"Yes,—a dinner for eighty people," sighed Benno. "Wolfgang thought it would be suitable for me to give a dinner to the party, and when Wolf takes a thing into his head one had best submit."

"He certainly was right this time," Gronau said, laughing. "As principal stockholder and director of the company you were bound to do something for the opening of the railway."

"If I only did not have to talk to everybody!" the poor doctor lamented. "And worse than all, I ought, he says, to make an after-dinner speech. I cannot. Wolfgang built the railway, let him make the speeches. He did, to be sure, speak to-day before we set out, and it was charming; every one was delighted,—his wife most of all. Does she not look exquisitely lovely?"

Veit nodded, but his face grew grave as he looked across at Erna. That beauty had driven another man to his death; Ernst Waltenberg would have given his hope of heaven for such a look as she was bestowing upon her husband at that moment. Gronau turned from such thoughts to ask after the health of Frau Reinsfeld.

"Oh, Alice is as blooming as a rose, and you must see our daughter." Benno's face glowed as he spoke of his wife and child. "You knew of——"

"Of your little one? Yes, you wrote me. I suppose you confine your practice entirely to your family now?"

"On the contrary, I have more patients than ever," the doctor declared. "When we are here in summer of course I attend all my old friends; and since I can now supply the poorer ones with all that they need——"

"Why, of course the honest Wolkensteiners con-

tinue to work you to death," Gronau finished the sentence. "But I must no longer detain you from your guests."

"Oh, stay; pray stay!" Benno exclaimed, with a comical look of alarm. "I am so comfortable here in the corner with you, and if you go I shall be obliged to talk to some of these celebrities, to whom I positively have nothing whatever to say."

Gronau laughed and stayed, but it was of no avail. Gersdorf, with Frau Molly upon his arm, made his appearance, and Elmhorst came hurrying towards them to carry off the luckless host, since the distinguished party were getting into the carriages to drive to the villa, where Alice was waiting to receive them. She was still a delicate creature in appearance, although in perfect health, and she had never lost a certain maidenly shyness of manner which was her great charm. The dignity of the household was admirably maintained by Frau von Lasberg, who had never left her former pupil.

The entertainment to-day left nothing to be desired. Poor Benno finally made his speech; of course he all but broke down in it, but it was fortunately just at the end, and Wolfgang at the critical moment signed to the musicians to strike up.

An hour afterwards the guests departed, conducted to the station by Elmhorst and his wife, who were, however, to return to pass several days with Reinsfeld and Alice at the villa.

Benno betook himself to the nursery, where the young mother was seated beside the cradle of their little daughter. He carried in his hand a bunch of Alpine roses: "It is Midsummer-eve, Alice; I had to bring you the wonted bouquet."

"Did you really remember it in all the confusion of the day?" the young mother asked, with a smile.

One never forgets a prophecy of happiness, least of all when it has been fulfilled. He handed her the flowers with,—

"Do not refuse it,—
Our offering of flowers,
And midsummer's blessings
Fall on you in showers."

* * * * * *

Evening had fallen when the engineer-in-chief and his wife stood on the platform of the Oberstein station, watching the departing train as it vanished in the tunnel beyond the bridge. "I have sent away the carriage, Erna," said Wolfgang. "I thought we would walk back, the evening is so fine, and we have not been alone once before to-day."

"And what a delightful day it has been!" said Erna, as she put her arm through her husband's. "Only you were so grave, Wolf, in the midst of your triumph, and you are so still."

He smiled, but his voice was grave as he replied, "I could not but remember how dearly the triumph has been bought, as only you and I can know. You have been my sole confidante, my only refuge, inspiring me with courage and ability when all sorts of petty intrigue nearly drove me insane. If you had not been beside me I could not have persevered."

"Yes, nothing could have been more trying for a nature like yours than to be so thwarted and harassed on all sides as you have been; but you have come off conqueror at last."

"And Benno has been such a help in placing every-

thing in my hands as soon as he was Alice's husband. I never can forget it of him."

"But he owes you more than he can repay," Erna interposed. "Think of how you worked for Alice after my uncle's death. They owe it to you that they are still wealthy."

As she spoke, the departed train, having passed through the tunnel, was visible like a black thread winding among the distant mountains, which softly echoed back the whistle of the locomotive through the quiet evening air. Wolfgang paused and drew a deep breath:

"Now she is quelled, the evil Force above there. She has given me trouble enough. Look, Erna, the last clouds are floating off from the throne of your Alpine Fay. She seems to unveil completely only on Midsummer-eve."

A shadow passed across Erna's happy face, and there were tears in her eyes as she said, looking up at the Wolkenstein, "One other conquered her, but he had to pay with his life the price of his victory."

"Rather of a foolhardy attempt that could benefit no one." Elmhorst's voice sounded harsh. "He risked his life, and found what he sought. Can you never forget him, Erna?"

She shook her head: "Do not be unjust, Wolf, nor jealous of the dead. You know well whom I have always loved. But it is impossible for you with your practical energy of character to comprehend a nature like Ernst's."

"Possibly; we were too diametrically antagonistic to be just to each other. But no more of him to-day, Erna; your memory and your thoughts to-day belong to me. The first height is surmounted; with the com-

pletion of the Wolkenstein railway a sure foundation is laid for my future. But the path was a difficult one."

"And yet it was delightful, in spite of cliffs and chasms," Erna declared. "Was I not right, Wolf? It is so fine to ascend from below, to feel your strength increase with every step onward, with every obstacle overcome, and at last to stand above on the height, conscious of victory, as you are now!"

"And with my best beloved beside me," Elmhurst added, with passionate tenderness. "You came to me in the darkest hour of my life, when everything about me was crumbling to ruin, and with you my lost fortune returned to me. Now I can hold it fast and pursue my way to loftier goals."

The night fell slowly, the sacred old Midsummer night with its breath of mystery. It was not filled as on that other night with dreamy moonlight, but a clear starlit sky arched above the mountains, which began to glow here and there with the beacon-fires,—the largest, as of old, kindled upon the slope of the Wolkenstein. It flashed abroad over the realm of the Alpine Fay,—her conquered realm, into which human will had broken a pathway in spite of all her terrors, and in which it had come off victorious in a strife with the blind fury of the elements. The work was finished,—the iron road wound secure among the mountains, the huge bridge spanned the dizzy chasm, and the Wolkenstein, unveiled, looked down upon it all. One brilliant star gleamed just above its peak upon the brow of the Alpine Fay.

THE END.

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